

*50th Anniversary Edition*

# Whittaker Chambers



# WITNESS

*New Forewords by  
William F. Buckley Jr.  
and Robert D. Novak*

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## Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[WITNESS AND FRIEND: REMEMBERING WHITTAKER CHAMBERS](#)

[A MASTERPIECE AT FIFTY](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1 - FLIGHT](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[X](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

[XIII](#)

[XIV](#)

[XV](#)

[XVI](#)

[XVII](#)

[XVIII](#)

[XIX](#)

[Chapter 2 - THE STORY OF A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[X](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

[XIII](#)

[XIV](#)

[XV](#)

---

[XVI](#)

[XVII](#)

[XVIII](#)

[XIX](#)

[XX](#)

[XXI](#)

[XXII](#)

[XXIII](#)

[XXIV](#)

[XXV](#)

[XXVI](#)

[XXVII](#)

[XXVIII](#)

[XXIX](#)

[XXX](#)

[XXXI](#)

[XXXII](#)

[XXXIII](#)

[XXXIV](#)

[XXXV](#)

[XXXVI](#)

[XXXVII](#)

[XXXVIII](#)

[XXXIX](#)

[XL](#)

[XLI](#)

[XLII](#)

[XLIII](#)

[XLIV](#)

[XLV](#)

[XLVI](#)

[XLVII](#)

[XLVIII](#)

[XLIX](#)

[L](#)

[LI](#)

[LII](#)

[LIII](#)

### [Chapter 3 - THE OUTRAGE AND THE HOPE OF THE WORLD](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

### [Chapter 4 - THE COMMUNIST PARTY](#)

---

[I](#)  
[II](#)  
[III](#)  
[IV](#)  
[V](#)  
[VI](#)  
[VII](#)  
[VIII](#)  
[IX](#)  
[X](#)  
[XI](#)  
[XII](#)  
[XIII](#)  
[XIV](#)  
[XV](#)  
[XVI](#)  
[XVII](#)  
[XVIII](#)  
[XIX](#)  
[XX](#)  
[XXI](#)  
[XXII](#)  
[XXIII](#)  
[XXIV](#)  
[XXV](#)  
[XXVI](#)  
[XXVII](#)  
[XXVIII](#)  
[XXIX](#)  
[XXX](#)  
[XXXI](#)  
[XXXII](#)  
[XXXIII](#)

## [Chapter 5 - UNDERGROUND](#)

[I](#)  
[II](#)  
[III](#)  
[IV](#)  
[V](#)  
[VI](#)  
[VII](#)  
[VIII](#)  
[IX](#)  
[X](#)

[XI](#)  
[XII](#)

---

[XIII](#)  
[XIV](#)  
[XV](#)  
[XVI](#)  
[XVI](#)  
[XVIII](#)  
[XIX](#)  
[XX](#)  
[XXI](#)  
[XXII](#)  
[XXIII](#)

[Chapter 6 - THE CHILD](#)

[I](#)

[Chapter 7 - UNDERGROUND](#)

[I](#)  
[II](#)  
[III](#)  
[IV](#)  
[V](#)  
[VI](#)  
[VII](#)  
[VIII](#)  
[IX](#)  
[X](#)  
[XI](#)  
[XII](#)  
[XIII](#)  
[XIV](#)  
[XV](#)  
[XVI](#)  
[XVII](#)  
[XVIII](#)  
[XIX](#)  
[XX](#)  
[XXI](#)  
[XXII](#)  
[XXIII](#)  
[XXIV](#)  
[XXV](#)  
[XXVI](#)  
[XXVII](#)

## Chapter 8 - COLONEL BORIS BYKOV

---

I  
II  
III  
IV  
V  
VI  
VII  
VIII  
IX  
X  
XI  
XII  
XIII  
XIV  
XV  
XVI  
XVII  
XVIII  
XX  
XXI  
XXI  
XXII  
XXIII

## Chapter 9 - THE DIVISION POINT

I

## Chapter 10 - THE TRANQUIL YEARS

I  
II  
III  
IV  
V  
VI  
VII  
VIII  
IX  
X  
XI  
XII  
XIII  
XIV

[XV](#)  
[XVI](#)

---

[XVII](#)  
[XVIII](#)  
[XIX](#)  
[XX](#)  
[XXI](#)  
[XXII](#)  
[XXIII](#)  
[XXIV](#)  
[XXV](#)  
[XXVI](#)  
[XXVII](#)  
[XXVIII](#)  
[XXIX](#)  
[XXX](#)  
[XXXI](#)  
[XXXII](#)  
[XXXIII](#)

## [Chapter 11 - THE HISS CASE](#)

[I](#)  
[II](#)  
[III](#)  
[IV](#)  
[V](#)  
[VI](#)  
[VII](#)  
[VIII](#)  
[IX](#)  
[X](#)  
[XI](#)  
[XII](#)  
[XIII](#)  
[XIV](#)  
[XV](#)  
[XVI](#)  
[XVII](#)  
[XVIII](#)  
[XIX](#)  
[XX](#)  
[XXI](#)  
[XXII](#)  
[XXIII](#)  
[XXIV](#)  
[XXV](#)

[XXVI](#)  
[XXVII](#)  
[XXVIII](#)  
[XXIX](#)  
[XXX](#)  
[XXXI](#)  
[XXXII](#)  
[XXXIII](#)  
[XXXIV](#)  
[XXXV](#)

[Chapter 12 - THE BRIDGE](#)

[I](#)

[Chapter 13 - THE HISS CASE II](#)

[I](#)  
[II](#)  
[III](#)  
[IV](#)  
[V](#)  
[VI](#)  
[VII](#)  
[VIII](#)  
[IX](#)  
[X](#)  
[XI](#)  
[XII](#)  
[XIII](#)  
[XIV](#)  
[XV](#)  
[XVI](#)  
[XVII](#)  
[XVIII](#)  
[XIX](#)  
[XX](#)  
[XXI](#)  
[XXII](#)  
[XXIII](#)  
[XXIV](#)  
[XXV](#)  
[XXVI](#)  
[XXVII](#)  
[XXVIII](#)  
[XXIX](#)  
[XXX](#)

[XXXI](#)

[XXXII](#)

---

[XXXIII](#)

[XXXIV](#)

[XXXV](#)

[XXXVI](#)

[XXXVII](#)

[XXXVIII](#)

[XXXIX](#)

[XL](#)

[XLI](#)

[XLII](#)

[XLIII](#)

[XLIV](#)

[XLV](#)

[XLVI](#)

[XLVII](#)

[XLVII](#)

[XLIX](#)

[L](#)

[LI](#)

[LII](#)

[LIII](#)

[LIV](#)

[LV](#)

[LVI](#)

## [Chapter 14 - 1949](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

## [Chapter 15 - TOMORROW AND TOMORROW AND TOMORROW](#)

[I](#)

## [INDEX](#)

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# WITNESS

**50th Anniversary Edition**

WHITTAKER CHAMBERS

Forewords by William F. Buckley Jr.  
and Robert D. Novak



*Gateway Editions*

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by William F. Buckley Jr.

*On July 9, 2001, the White House held a special ceremony to honor Whittaker Chambers on the fortieth anniversary of his death. At the private ceremony, held in the Old Executive Office Building, William F. Buckley Jr. recalled his friendship with Chambers.*

I first met Whittaker Chambers in 1954. An almost total silence had closed in on him. Two years earlier he had published *Witness*. When the preface of *Witness* appeared as a feature in the *Saturday Evening Post*, that issue of the magazine sold a startling half million extra copies on the newsstands. The book came out with a great flurry. The bitterness of the Alger Hiss trial had not subsided. For some of the reviewers, Hiss's innocence had once been a fixed rational conviction, then blind faith, and now, after the publication of that overwhelming book, rank superstition.

But the nature of the author was not grasped by the reviewers. "I am a heavy man," Chambers once wrote me, apologizing for staying two days at my home. There is a sense in which that was true. But he never appreciated, as others could do, the true gaiety of his nature, the appeal of his mysterious humor, the instant communicability of an overwhelming personal tenderness; his friends—I think especially of Ralph de Toledano—took endless and articulate pleasure from his company.

*Witness* was off to a great start. But, surprisingly, it did not continue to sell in keeping with its spectacular send-off. The length of the book was forbidding; and the trial, in any case, was three years old, and the cold sweat had dried. Alger Hiss was in prison, and now the political furor centered about Senator McCarthy. Those who did not know the book, and who were not emotionally committed either to Chambers's guilt or to his innocence, seemed to shrink even from a vicarious involvement in the controversy, to a considerable extent because of the dark emanations that came from Chambers's depressing when reproduced, as was widely done, in bits and snatches torn from the narrative. "Upon reading *Witness* it had been my impression," Hugh Kenner, the author and critic, had written me, "that his mind moved, or wallowed, in a setting of continuous apocalypse from which he derived gloom and satisfactions, of an immobilizing sort. The large scale of *Witness* makes things much clearer. It is surprisingly free from rhetoric, and it makes clear the genuine magnitude of the action which was his life; a Sophoclean tragedy in slow motion, years not hours."

In 1954 I asked if I might visit him. He had written to a longstanding friend, Henry Regnery, the publisher of my book on Senator McCarthy, to praise the book while making clear his criticisms and differences with its subject. Chambers had been struck down by a heart attack and it was vaguely known that he spent his days in and out of a sickbed, from which the likelihood was that he would never again emerge physically whole. I had every reason to believe that I would be visiting Jeremiah lying alongside a beckoning tomb.

I was taken to his bedroom. The doctor had forbidden him even to raise his head. And yet he seemed the liveliest man I had ever met. I could not imagine such good humor from a very sick man, let alone anyone possessed by the conviction that night was closing in all over the world, privately tortured by his continuing fear that the forces aligned against him would contrive to reorder history, impose upon the world the ghastly lie that he had testified falsely against Alger Hiss, and so erase his witness, his expiation for more than ten years' complicity with Communism.

We did not, of course, speak of Hiss, nor did we for several months; though later he spoke of himself and of the case, with candor. But we talked about everything else, and I left Westminster later than I should have, hustled anxiously to the door by a wife who knew she was helpless absolutely to enforce

the doctor's rules.

As he began to recover he was, for a period, greatly renewed by a physical and spiritual energy that were dialectically at odds with his organic ill health and his intellectual commitment to the futility of all meliorative action in the Cold War. I talked with him about the magazine I proposed to publish and asked whether he would join the staff. To my astonishment the answer was yes—he would consider doing just that. We corresponded through the summer. He was to make up his mind definitely during the fall, after we visited again.

I made the mistake in one of my letters of expressing exorbitant hopes for the role *National Review* might play in political affairs. He dashed them down in a paragraph unmatched in the literature of supine gloom, sentences that President Reagan, who was in awe of their eloquence, and defiant of their fatalism, publicly recalled more than once. "It is idle," he rebuked me, "to talk about preventing the wreck of Western civilization. It is already a wreck from within. That is why we can hope to do little more now than snatch a fingernail of a saint from the rack or a handful of ashes from the faggots, and bury them secretly in a flowerpot against the day, ages hence, when a few men begin again to dare to believe that there was once something else, that something else is thinkable, and need some evidence of what it was, and the fortifying knowledge that there were those who, at the great nightfall, took loving thought to preserve the tokens of hope and truth."

The tokens of hope and truth were not to be preserved, he seemed to be saying, in a journal of opinion, not to be preserved by writers or thinkers. Only by activists, and I was to know that I had considered a publication—the right kind of publication—not a word, but a deed. In the final analysis it was action, not belletrism, that moved him most deeply.

And so in time I came to understand why in 1932 he resigned as editor of the *Communist News for the Masses*, where he had earned an international reputation as a writer, to go scurrying about the streets of Washington, Baltimore, and New York, carrying pocketfuls of negatives and secret phone numbers and invisible ink. "One of the great failures of *Witness*," he wrote me, "is that there was no time or place to describe the influences, other than immediate historical influences, that brought me to Communism. I came to Communism ... above all under the influence of the Narodniki. They have been deliberately forgotten, but, in those days, Lenin urged us to revere the Narodniki—'those who went with bomb or revolver against this or that individual monster.' Unlike most Western Communists, who became Communists under the influence of the Social Democrats, I remained under the spiritual influence of the Narodniki long after I became a Marxist. In fact, I never threw it off, I never have. And, of course, it was that revolutionary quality [in me] that bemused Alger—*mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*"

Activism. From the Narodniki to the Republican Party, in one defection.

But now he would stay on at his farm, and worry from his sickbed.

He had a great deal to worry about. His broken health and near penury enhanced an insubordinate restlessness. "I do not even have the capital to farm halfheartedly," he wrote me, "and I cannot, as in the past, make good the capital by my own labor power. This inability to work is perhaps the greatest burr in my mind. It torments me since, among other disabilities, I have no talent for being a country gentleman."

He reached the low point of his spirits as he sweated in philosophical bedrock, gathering his thoughts: "I have been splashing about in my private pool of ice water." In another letter, "I have ceased to understand why I must go on living." In still another, "The year was, for me, a long walk through the valley. No one but me will ever know how close I came to staying in it."

Did he isolate the trouble? Yes. "It had to do with my inability to fix the meaning of the current period of existence in some communicable way. I knew the fault lay in me. So that, all the while I was trying to write, I was simply trying to grow."

But the weeks went by. Eisenhower ran and was reelected. Nixon was safely vice president. Some months later Chambers wrote to say he was ready to sign up with *National Review*. Having made the decision, he was elated. After five years of isolation and introspection, he was like a painter who had recovered his eyesight. He felt the need to practice his art. How many things he wanted to write about and immediately! Mushrooms, for one thing. Albert Camus. What a lot of things needed to be said instantly about *The Myth of Sisyphus*! Milovan Djilas's *New Class* was just out, and most of the critics, he said, had missed the whole point.

But what he wrote about first was the farmers. He anticipated a gradual end to their independence. "Perhaps [in the future, the socialized farmer] will not be able ... to find or frame an answer [to why I lost his freedom]. Perhaps he will not need to. For perhaps the memory of those men and women [who fought socialism] will surprise him, as with an unfamiliar but arresting sound—the sound of spring heads, long dried up and silent in a fierce drought, suddenly burst out and rushing freely to the sea. It may remind him of a continuity that outlives all lives, fears, perplexities, contriving, hopes, defeat, so that he is moved to reach down and touch again for strength, as if he were its first discoverer, the changeless thing—the undeluding, undenyng earth."

Chambers decided in the summer of 1958 to come up to New York every fortnight and spend two days in the office with his colleagues, writing editorials and features for the magazine. He would arrive on the train from Baltimore at noon and come directly to the editorial lunch, always out of breath, perspiring in his city clothes. He liked his little cubicle at *National Review*, which, five minutes after he entered it, smelled like a pipe-tobacco factory. He puffed away devotedly, grinding out memorable editorials and paragraphs.

Yet anyone meeting Chambers casually, without preconception, would judge him an amusing and easily amused man. The bottomless gravity seldom suggested itself. He was not merely a man of wit but also a man of humor, and even of fun. Often, in his letters, even through his orotund gloom, the pixie would surface. ("Would that we could live in the world of the fauves," he wrote me at Christmas "where the planes are disjointed only on canvas, instead of a world where the wild beasts are real and the disjointures threaten to bury us.")

On Tuesday nights we worked late, and four or five of us would go to dinner. By then he was physically exhausted. But he wanted to come with us, and we would eat at whatever restaurant, and he would talk hungrily (and eat hungrily), talk about everything that interested him, which was literally everything in this world, and not in this world. He talked often around a subject, swooping in to make a quick point, withdrawing, relaxing, laughing, listening—he listened superbly, though even as a listener he was a potent force.

The next morning, press day, he was at his desk at eight, and, for lunch, a sandwich. At five he was on the train back to Baltimore, where his wife would meet him. On reaching his farm he would drop on his bed from fatigue. Three months after coming to New York, he collapsed from another heart attack. But in the summer of 1959 he felt well enough to indulge a dream, more particularly his gentle wife's dream, to visit Europe. We drove them to the airport after a happy day. I noticed worriedly how heavily he perspired and how nervously his heavy thumbs shuffled through the bureaucratic paraphernalia of modern travel, as he dug up, in turn, passports, baggage tags, vaccination certificates and airplane tickets. His plans were vague, but at the heart of them was a visit to his old friend, Arthur Koestler.

They were at Koestler's eyrie in Austria for a week. "Alpach, where AK lives, is some four hundred meters higher into the hills than Innsbruck," he wrote me. "So there we sat, and talked, not merely about the daily experiences of our lives. Each of the two men with us had tried to kill himself and failed; Greta Buber-Neumann was certainly the most hardy and astonishing of the three. Then we realized that, of our particular breed, the old activists, we are almost the only survivors...."

They went on to Rome (“In Rome, I had to ask Esther for the nitroglycerine. Since then, I’ve been living on the stuff...”). And then Venice (“I came back to Venice chiefly to rest. If it were not for my children, I should try to spend the rest of my life here ...”). Berlin (“I feel as though I had some kind of moral compulsion to go at this time ...”). Paris (“You will look up Malraux?” I wrote him—remembered the gratitude Chambers felt on receiving a handwritten note from Malraux with his judgment of *Witness*: “You have not come back from hell with empty hands”).

But he took sick again and, abruptly, they flew back; again he was in bed. He wanted now to resign from *National Review*. It was partly that his poor health and his unconquerable perfectionism kept him from producing a flow of copy large enough to satisfy his conscience. Partly it was his *Weltanschauung*, which was constantly in motion. He resisted *National Review*’s schematic conservatism, even its schematic anti-Communism. “You ... stand within, or at any rate are elaborating, a political orthodoxy,” his letter explained. “I stand within no political orthodoxy.... I am at heart a counter-revolutionist. You mean to be conservative, and I know no one who seems to me to have a better right to the term. I am not a conservative. I am a man of the Right. I shall vote the straight Republican ticket for as long as I live.”

And, always looking within the Marxist world for amplification, he found it. “You see, I am an Orgbureau man. But if the Republican Party cannot get some grip of the actual world we live in and from it generalize and actively promote a program that means something to the masses of people—why somebody else will. Then there will be nothing to argue. The voters will simply vote Republican into singularity. The Republican Party will become like one of those dark little shops which apparently never sell anything. If, for any reason, you go in, you find at the back an old man, fingering for his own pleasure some oddments of cloth. Nobody wants to buy them, which is fine because the old man is not really interested in selling. He just likes to hold and to feel....”

He had made up his mind to do something else. He enrolled at Western Maryland College as an undergraduate.

He had quit *National Review*; he had failed to complete the book that Random House had been expecting for six years. He did not want to sit at home, half crippled and denied the life he would, he thought, have liked most to lead, the life of a dawn-to-dusk farmer. Whittaker Chambers was all Puritan about work. Idleness was incomprehensible to him. But there was another reason for going back to school. In Europe, Koestler had said to him sharply, “You cannot understand what is going on in the world unless you understand science deeply.” Very well, then, he would learn science.

He threw himself into his work. Science courses galore. For relaxation, Greek, Latin, and advanced French composition. Every morning he drove to school and sat among the farmers’ sons of western Maryland, taking notes, dissecting frogs, reciting Greek paradigms, working tangled problems in physics. Home, and immediately to the basement to do his homework. Everything else was put aside.

He signed up for the summer session but in the interstice between terms he drove north to see his daughter, Ellen. En route he spent a day with us on a hot afternoon. “How do you get on,” my wife asked, “with your fellow undergraduates?” “Fine,” he said, puffing on his pipe. In fact, we learned, he had an admirer. A young lady—aged about nineteen, he guessed—shared with him the allocated carcasses of small animals, which the two of them, in tandem, proceeded to disembowel. He had written to me about her. “For months while we worked together she addressed me not a word, and I was afraid my great age had frightened her. But last week she broke silence. She said breathlessly, ‘Mr. Chambers?’ ‘Yes,’ I answered her anxiously. ‘Tell me, what do you think of “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka-dot Bikini”?’” He recalled the question now with laughter. He hadn’t, at that critical moment, any idea that the young lady was talking about a popular song, but he had improvised successfully until he could deduce what she was talking about, and then confided to his vivisectionist that it just happened that this was one of his very favorite songs. Her excitement was

indescribable. From that moment on they chirped together as soul mates, pooling their knowledge spleens and livers, kidneys and upper intestines.

I imagine that he was a very quiet student, giving his teachers no cause whatever for the uneasiness they might have expected to feel in the presence of so august a mind. During examination weeks he was in a constant state of high boil. He slaved for his grades and achieved them, even in the alien field of science; all A's, or A minuses; once, as I remember, a humiliating B plus. After the spring term his fatigue was total, overwhelming. "Weariness, Bill," he wrote in the last letter I had from him, in the summer of 1961, "you cannot yet know literally what it means. I wish no time would come when you do know, but the balance of experience is against it. One day, long hence, you will know true weariness and will say: 'That was it.' My own life of late has been full of such realizations."

He learned science, and killed himself. Those were the two things, toward the end, for which he strived.

"Why on earth doesn't your father answer the phone?" I asked his daughter, Ellen, in Connecticut on Saturday afternoon, the 8th of July. "Because," she said with a laugh, shyly, "Poppa and the phone company are having a little tiff, and the phone is disconnected. They wanted him to trim one of his favorite trees to take the strain off the telephone line, and he put them off. So... they turned off the phone." I wired him: WHEN YOU COME TO TERMS WITH THE PHONE COMPANY GIVE ME A RING. But he didn't call. The following Tuesday when I walked into my office the phone was ringing. I took the call standing in front of my desk. It was John Chambers, his son. He gave me the news. heart attack. The final heart attack. Cremation in total privacy. His mother was in the hospital. The news would go to the press later that afternoon. I mumbled the usual things, hung up the telephone, sat down, and wept.

He had written me once, "American men, who weep in droves in movie houses, over the woes of lovestruck shop girls, hold that weeping in men is unmanly. I have found most men in whom there was depth of experience, or capacity for compassion, singularly apt to tears. How can it be otherwise? One looks and sees: and it would be a kind of impotence to be incapable of, or to grudge, the comment on tears, even while you struggle against it. I am immune to soap opera. But I cannot listen for any length of time to the speaking voice of Kirsten Flagstad, for example, without being done in by the magnificence of tone that seems to speak from the center of sorrow, even from the center of the earth."

For me, and others who knew him, his voice had been like Kirsten Flagstad's, magnificent in tone, speaking to our time from the center of sorrow, from the center of the earth.

*William F. Buckley Jr, founded National Review magazine in 1955. He is the author of more than forty books and is the editor of Whittaker Chambers's Odyssey of a Friend: Letters to William F. Buckley Jr., 1954-1961. For more than thirty years Buckley hosted the television show Firing Line, and his newspaper column, "On the Right," is syndicated to more than three hundred newspapers. His most recent books are Let Us Talk of Many Things: The Collected Speeches and the novel Elvis in the Morning.*

by Robert D. Novak

The death of Alger Hiss at the age of ninety-two on November 15, 1996, provoked bizarre responses from people who should have known better.

ABC anchorman Peter Jennings, apparently drawing on an erroneous wire service dispatch, went on the air to assert that Russian president Boris Yeltsin had declared that secret KGB files confirmed Hiss never worked for the Soviets. Yeltsin had said no such thing.

Nine days later, Anthony Lake, the national security advisor whom President Bill Clinton would soon nominate to be CIA director, was asked whether Hiss had indeed been a Soviet spy; Lake replied, “I don’t think it [the evidence] is conclusive.”

It is remarkable that, nearly half a century after Hiss’s conviction, well-informed and presumably prudent people could still harbor any doubts that Hiss, as a senior State Department official, had in fact been a secret agent of the Fourth Section of Soviet Military Intelligence. Yet Mr. Jennings and Mr. Lake represent many others who cannot fully accept the reality that Alger Hiss was lying and Whittaker Chambers was telling the truth.

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union have only strengthened this tendency. In his 1997 biography of Chambers, Sam Tanenhaus wrote, “What sets the Hiss case apart then and now, was not its mystery but the passionate belief of so many that Hiss must be innocent no matter what the evidence.” Tanenhaus, no conservative, looked at the evidence and reached the inevitable conclusion of Hiss’s guilt.

Mr. Jennings and Mr. Lake implied that Chambers was a liar, branding his life and his character a lie. I would guess that neither of these gentlemen has read *Witness*. If that is the case, they have missed an enriching experience.

Early in 1953, as a twenty-two-year-old second lieutenant on active duty in the U.S. Army awaiting combat assignment (it never came) to a war in Korea that my government showed no desire to win, I read the newly published *Witness*. It changed my worldview, my philosophical perceptions, and, without exaggeration, my life.

I am not alone. From time to time over the years, in after-dinner conversations with politicians on the campaign circuit, I have found a common bond with others—some a generation younger—who have been alarmed, entranced, and always inspired by *Witness*.

I have read *Witness* in its entirety on four subsequent occasions, and I have dipped into the book many other times. On each occasion, I have come away with new insights. Increasingly, over the intervening decades, the questions and conflicts posed by Whittaker Chambers have been in my thoughts.

In 1987, the *Washington Times* ran a profile of me in which I mentioned the profound impact that Chambers and *Witness* had had on me. The *Times* piece produced fraternal professions from like-minded readers of *Witness* and the kind invitation from Regnery Publishing to write the preface for a new edition of the book being prepared at that time. But the profile also demonstrated that the derision and contempt for Whittaker Chambers aroused by the Hiss case long ago had been replicated in a new generation. If Chambers imagined “derisive” readers asking how they could take him “seriously” after he revealed the impact Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* had made on his life, I did not have to imagine what derision would meet me. My colleagues in journalism snickered and sneered: “Chambers and

*Witness*? Some hero! Some inspiration!”

At the time, I incorrectly thought that the residual contempt by some not yet born when Whittaker Chambers bore witness against Hiss did not stem from widespread lingering belief in Hiss’s innocence—at least not from anyone this side of *The Nation*. *Witness* had convinced me in 1953, and anybody professing a shred of rationality at long last should have been convinced by Allen Weinstein’s *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*, published in 1978.

To be sure, in 1992, after the fall of the Soviet Union, a military historian and sometime Yeltsin advisor named Dmitri Volkogonov sent Hiss a letter exonerating him after a search of existing KGB files. But joy among the Hiss loyalists was short-lived. General Volkogonov admitted that he had not made a careful search of the files and that many files had been destroyed. Shortly thereafter, according to Russian researchers, intelligence officers removed all remaining KGB files relevant to Chambers and Hiss.

In 1993, the end of Communism in Hungary yielded from the Interior Ministry archives in Budapest a dossier containing a 1954 interview with American Communist Noel Field in which he revealed his espionage collaboration in the United States with Alger Hiss. In 1995, the U.S. government released decrypted cables between Moscow and Soviet agents based in America that pointed to Hiss as a Soviet agent.

So, case closed: Alger Hiss was a liar, spy, and traitor.

Why then the continuing refusal to accept reality? There may be a residual distaste for Chambers as a nonheroic figure, tortured by his tragic role, wracked by inclinations toward suicide, and, like most of us, not immune to sins of the flesh. But even if Chambers were as elegant as Hiss, I suspect the obloquy would not be much less intense.

The problem with Whittaker Chambers is that he is no more a congenial figure for the twenty-first century than he was for the mid-twentieth. While smashing away at the liberal consensus, he does not even reassure conservative conventions.

On the first full page of *Witness*, he talks of “this sick society, which we call Western Civilization locked in a struggle between “the two irreconcilable faiths of our time—Communism and Freedom. A relativist establishment that never forgave Ronald Reagan for just one time branding the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” could not abide a Chambers who indicts Communism as “evil, absolute evil.” For Westerners who imagined in each succeeding Soviet ruler a turn from Stalinism, Chambers was hard to take: “The point was not that Stalin was evil, but that Communism is more evil, and that acting through his person, it found its supremely logical manifestation.”

It is this portrayal that so transformed my attitudes as a young army officer and that so offended the moral and cultural relativists of the world. But that scarcely is the limit of Chambers’s capacity to outrage the establishment.

He views this struggle as inseparable from faith in God, asserting that “man without mysticism is a monster.” He goes on to assail liberals as sharing with Communists “a similar vision” of man without God and indeed sharing complicity with them. Finally there is his conviction that in leaving Communism he has switched from the winning to the losing side.

The defeat of Communism in the Cold War shows that Chambers was wrong on this salient point. But it is imperative for the future of Western civilization to explore the reasoning behind his error.

Chambers’s assertion that he was on the losing side was heavy going for conventional America. It was heavy going for me when I first read *Witness*. But in moving from youth to advanced middle age with each rereading I came to accept more and more of it as harsh reality and yet, paradoxically, as a preeminent source of hope.

Chambers has Communism posing “the most revolutionary question in history: God or Man? ... man’s mind is the decisive force in the world, what need is there for God?” Describing the twentieth

as the first century in which man “has deliberately rejected God,” he sees an “irrepressible” conflict among and within nations between “those who reject and those who worship God.”

That is hard enough for a secularized establishment. Harder still is his contention that Communism is only the “most conspicuously menacing form” of God-rejection. He points to Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, which he sees as a “genuine revolution.” Herein is Chambers’s explanation of why his exposure in 1939—to Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle—of a highly placed espionage ring including Hiss, went unheeded until his subpoena from the House Committee on Un-American Activities, in 1948.

It was not treason: “Men who sincerely abhorred the word Communism in the pursuit of common ends found that they were unable to distinguish Communists from themselves.... For men who could not see that what they firmly believed was liberalism added up to socialism could scarcely be expected to see what added up to Communism. Any charge of Communism enraged them precisely because they could not grasp the differences between themselves and those against whom it was made.” So it was that the Hiss spy ring was covered up for nearly a decade.

In his congressional testimony, Hiss consciously encouraged the defenders of the New Deal to consider Chambers’s revelations as an attack against their cause (“to discredit recent great achievements of this country in which I was privileged to participate”). When he aimed at Communism, Chambers confessed, he “also hit something else.” It was, he said, “that great social revolution, which, in the name of liberalism ... has been inching its ice cap over the nation for two decades.”

Even decades later, such rhetoric would generate the reflexive charge of McCarthyism, though Chambers regarded Senator McCarthy as a disaster for the anti-Communist cause. The suggestion that the liberal could not cope with the Communist menace generated passionate indignation.

The element of *Witness* rejected by conservatives as well as liberals is its pessimism. First-time readers are stunned by the first page of Chapter 1, when Chambers recounts telling his wife that he was turning from Communism: “You know,” he recalls saying, “we are leaving the winning world for the losing world.” He adds that “almost nothing” has made him think he was wrong about that judgment.

But *Witness* has not been continually reread and republished because of Chambers’s playing Cassandra. It has not been fervently pressed onto children by me and many others because it is a testament of doom.

Curiously, the message of hope prevails in the end. Chambers the ex-Communist is finally eclipsed by Chambers the Christian. His pessimism on political grounds is tempered by faith—in God and in his fellow Americans.

It was Providence that finally enabled Chambers, at such personal cost, to “win” the Hiss case. He sees the hand of God in the selection of the intrepid Thomas Murphy as federal prosecutor of Hiss when the overriding attitude of the Truman administration, from the president on down, was contempt and derision. Had there not been a thirty-five-year-old freshman congressman from California named Richard M. Nixon who insisted on carrying through the case for Chambers, it would have been buried by Hiss’s lies and evasions. Indeed, for someone with the strength and force of Chambers to sacrifice his life for his country can be called providential.

But why was he then so pessimistic about the world struggle? Like Ignazio Silone in *The School for Dictators*, Chambers could not conceive of a citizenry able to overcome the modern police and military power of the twentieth-century state. That skepticism was confirmed by the failure of popular revolts against Communist rule in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968. But in 1989, when revolution again seized the old capitals of central Europe, the ramparts of Communist tyranny were brought down in a wave that finally extended all the way to the Kremlin.

Biographer Tanenhaus places journalist Ralph de Toledano “among the first of a generation of intellectuals who saw Chambers as a towering moral figure.” He was followed by William F. Buckley Jr., the young editor of the fledgling *National Review*, who developed a close relationship with Chambers and, from afar, with young people like me. All were infused with Chambersian commitment to the struggle but also with Chambersian pessimism about the future.

Chambers and all his acolytes, in the final analysis, fell short in failing to fully appreciate the hand of God. Tanenhaus sees his subject “interested in religion—more precisely, in the convergence of religion and politics.” Yet Chambers could not imagine a divine power overseeing the epochal struggle.

What else other than such intervention can explain the failure of seventy years of relentless military control in the Soviet Union and forty-five years in its satellites? There may have been divine inspiration in the mistake by Mikhail Gorbachev in relaxing, ever so little, that horrible apparatus of social engineering and terror that was the Communist empire—whereupon, the whole rotten edifice began crumbling.

The end of the Communist empire leads to interpretations of *Witness* on new levels. Rereading it, I am struck by its invocation of tragedy in modern America. Chambers, the son of a dysfunctional middle-class family, is driven to dissent, treason, and finally what he refers to as making, “like Lazarus, the impossible return.” Andre Malraux told Chambers in a letter, “You are one of those who did not return from hell with empty hands.”

This is a literary masterpiece, but it is also a political instrument, something the Left recognized from the moment of its publication in 1952. “The great effort of this new Right,” said novelist Marjorie McCarthy in a private letter, “is to get itself accepted as a *normal* part of publishing.” She added that this effort “must be scotched, if it’s not already too late.” It was indeed too late.

Chambers concludes this often anguished work with a testament of faith in the American people. While the “best people” of the nation then supported Hiss (and to this very day belittle Chambers), I believe that by and large most Americans had come to realize “what forces disastrous to the nation were at work in the Hiss case.”

Chambers calls them “my people, humble people, strong in common sense, in common goodness, in common forgiveness.” Would that they all read this book, to be inspired and strengthened, as I and many others have been.

In 1990, former president Richard Nixon, missing his original copy of *Witness*, which he had loaned out, wrote me a letter noting that he had purchased the new 1987 edition and read my preface. “The highest compliment I can pay is that it reads like Chambers,” Nixon said. I can conceive of no higher compliment in my journalistic career.

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## FOREWORD IN THE FORM OF A LETTER TO MY CHILDREN

Beloved Children,

I am sitting in the kitchen of the little house at Medfield, our second farm which is cut off by the ridge and a quarter-mile across the fields from our home place, where you are. I am writing a book. It is not just I who am speaking to you. But I am also speaking to the world. To both I owe an accounting.

It is a terrible book. It is terrible in what it tells about men. If anything, it is more terrible in what it tells about the world in which you live. It is about what the world calls the Hiss-Chambers Case, even more simply, the Hiss Case. It is about a spy case. All the props of an espionage case are there—foreign agents, household traitors, stolen documents, microfilm, furtive meetings, secret hideaway, phony names, an informer, investigations, trials, official justice.

But if the Hiss Case were only this, it would not be worth my writing about or your reading about. It would be another fat folder in the sad files of the police, another crime drama in which the props would be mistaken for the play (as many people have consistently mistaken them). It would not be what alone gave it meaning, what the mass of men and women instinctively sensed it to be, often without quite knowing why. It would not be what, at the very beginning, I was moved to call it: “a tragedy of history.”

For it was more than human tragedy. Much more than Alger Hiss or Whittaker Chambers was on trial in the trials of Alger Hiss. 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 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 which would distort and pervert the facts.

At heart, the Great Case was this critical conflict of faiths; that is why it was a great case. On a scale personal enough to be felt by all, but big enough to be symbolic, the two irreconcilable faiths of our time—Communism and Freedom—came to grips in the persons of two conscious and resolute men. Indeed, it would have been hard, in a world still only dimly aware of what the conflict is about, to find two other men who knew so clearly. Both had been schooled in the same view of history (the Marxist view). Both were trained by the same party in the same selfless, semisoldierly discipline. Neither would nor could yield without betraying, not himself, but his faith; and the different character of these faiths was shown by the different conduct of the two men toward each other throughout the struggle. For, with dark certitude, both knew, almost from the beginning, that the Great Case could end only in the destruction of one or both of the contending figures, just as the history of our time (both men had been taught) can end only in the destruction of one or both of the contending forces.

But this destruction is not the tragedy. The nature of tragedy is itself misunderstood. Part of the world supposes that the tragedy in the Hiss Case lies in the acts of disloyalty revealed. Part believes that the tragedy lies in the fact that an able, intelligent man, Alger Hiss, was cut short in the course of a brilliant public career. Some find it tragic that Whittaker Chambers, of his own will, gave up a \$30,000-a-year job and a secure future to haunt for the rest of his days the ruins of his life. These are shocking facts, criminal facts, disturbing facts: they are not tragic.

Crime, violence, infamy are not tragedy. Tragedy occurs when a human soul awakes and seeks, i

suffering and pain, to free itself from crime, violence, infamy, even at the cost of life. The struggle the tragedy—not defeat or death. That is why the spectacle of tragedy has always filled men, not with despair, but with a sense of hope and exaltation. That is why this terrible book is also a book of hope. For it is about the struggle of the human soul—of more than one human soul. It is in this sense that the Hiss Case is a tragedy. This is its meaning beyond the headlines, the revelations, the shame and suffering of the people involved. But this tragedy will have been for nothing unless men understand it rightly, and from it the world takes hope and heart to begin its own tragic struggle with the evil that besets it from within and from without, unless it faces the fact that the world, the whole world, is sliding unto death and that, among other things, this Case has turned a finger of fierce light into the sudden, opened and reeking body of our time.

My children, as long as you live, the shadow of the Hiss Case will brush you. In every pair of eyes that rests on you, you will see pass, like a cloud passing behind a woods in winter, the memory of your father—dissembled in friendly eyes, lurking in unfriendly eyes. Sometimes you will wonder which is harder to bear: friendly forgiveness or forthright hate. In time, therefore, when the sum of your experience of life gives you authority, you will ask yourselves the question: What was my father?

I will give you an answer: I was a witness. I do not mean a witness for the Government or against Alger Hiss and the others. Nor do I mean the short, squat, solitary figure, trudging through the impersonal halls of public buildings to testify before Congressional committees, grand juries, loyalist boards, courts of law. A man is not primarily a witness *against* something. That is only incidental to the fact that he is a witness for something. A witness, in the sense that I am using the word, is a man whose life and faith are so completely one that when the challenge comes to step out and testify for his faith, he does so, disregarding all risks, accepting all consequences.

One day in the great jury room of the Grand Jury of the Southern District of New York, a juror leaned forward slightly and asked me: “Mr. Chambers, what does it mean to be a Communist?” I hesitated for a moment, trying to find the simplest, most direct way to convey the heart of this complex experience to men and women to whom the very fact of the experience was all but incomprehensible. Then I said:

“When I was a Communist, I had three heroes. One was a Russian. One was a Pole. One was a German Jew.

“The Pole was Felix Djerjinsky. He was ascetic, highly sensitive, intelligent. He was a Communist. After the Russian Revolution, he became head of the Tcheka and organizer of the Red Terror. As a young man, Djerjinsky had been a political prisoner in the Paviak Prison in Warsaw. There he insisted on being given the task of cleaning the latrines of the other prisoners. For he held that the most developed member of any community must take upon himself the lowliest tasks as an example to those who are less developed. That is one thing that it meant to be a Communist.

“The German Jew was Eugen Leviné. He was a Communist. During the Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919, Leviné was the organizer of the Workers and Soldiers Soviets. When the Bavarian Soviet Republic was crushed, Leviné was captured and court-martialed. The court-martial told him: ‘You are under sentence of death.’ Leviné answered: ‘We Communists are always under sentence of death.’ That is another thing that it meant to be a Communist.

“The Russian was not a Communist. He was a pre-Communist revolutionist named Kalyaev. (I should have said Sazonov.) He was arrested for a minor part in the assassination of the Tsarist prime minister, von Plehve. He was sent into Siberian exile to one of the worst prison camps, where the political prisoners were flogged. Kalyaev sought some way to protest this outrage to the world. The means were few, but at last he found a way. In protest against the flogging of other men, Kalyaev drenched himself in kerosene, set himself on fire and burned himself to death. That also is what

meant to be a Communist.”

That also is what it means to be a witness.

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But a man may also be an involuntary witness. I do not know any way to explain why God's grace touches a man who seems unworthy of it. But neither do I know any other way to explain how a man like myself—tarnished by life, unprepossessing, not brave—could prevail so far against the powers of the world arrayed almost solidly against him, to destroy him and defeat his truth. In this sense, I am an involuntary witness to God's grace and to the fortifying power of faith.

It was my fate to be in turn a witness to each of the two great faiths of our time. And so we come to the terrible word, Communism. My very dear children, nothing in all these pages will be written so much for you, though it is so unlike anything you would want to read. In nothing shall I be so much a witness, in no way am I so much called upon to fulfill my task, as in trying to make clear to you (and to the world) the true nature of Communism and the source of its power, which was the cause of my ordeal as a man, and remains the historic ordeal of the world in the 20th century. For in this century, within the next decades, will be decided for generations whether all mankind is to become Communist, whether the whole world is to become free, or whether, in the struggle, civilization as we know it is to be completely destroyed or completely changed. It is our fate to live upon that turning point in history.

The world has reached that turning point by the steep stages of a crisis mounting for generations. The turning point is the next to the last step. It was reached in blood, sweat, tears, havoc and death in World War II. The chief fruit of the First World War was the Russian Revolution and the rise of Communism as a national power. The chief fruit of the Second World War was our arrival at the next to the last step of the crisis with the rise of Communism as a world power. History is likely to say that these were the only decisive results of the world wars.

The last war simplified the balance of political forces in the world by reducing them to two. For the first time, it made the power of the Communist sector of mankind (embodied in the Soviet Union) roughly equal to the power of the free sector of mankind (embodied in the United States). It made the collision of these powers all but inevitable. For the world wars did not end the crisis. They raised its tensions to a new pitch. They raised the crisis to a new stage. All the politics of our time, including the politics of war, will be the politics of this crisis.

Few men are so dull that they do not know that the crisis exists and that it threatens their lives at every point. It is popular to call it a social crisis. It is in fact a total crisis—religious, moral, intellectual, social, political, economic. It is popular to call it a crisis of the Western world. It is in fact a crisis of the whole world. Communism, which claims to be a solution of the crisis, is itself a symptom and an irritant of the crisis.

In part, the crisis results from the impact of science and technology upon mankind which, neither socially nor morally, has caught up with the problems posed by that impact. In part, it is caused by men's efforts to solve those problems. World wars are the military expression of the crisis. World-wide depressions are its economic expression. Universal desperation is its spiritual climate. This is the climate of Communism. Communism in our time can no more be considered apart from the crisis than a fever can be acted upon apart from an infected body.

I see in Communism the focus of the concentrated evil of our time. You will ask: Why, then, did men become Communists? How did it happen that you, our gentle and loved father, were once a Communist? Were you simply stupid? No, I was not stupid. Were you morally depraved? No, I was not morally depraved. Indeed, educated men become Communists chiefly for moral reasons. Did you not know that the crimes and horrors of Communism are inherent in Communism? Yes, I knew the fact. Then why did you become a Communist? It would help more to ask: How did it happen that the

movement, once a mere muttering of political outcasts, became this immense force that now contests the mastery of mankind? Even when all the chances and mistakes of history are allowed for, the answer must be: Communism makes some profound appeal to the human mind. You will not find out what it is by calling Communism names. That will not help much to explain why Communism whose horrors, on a scale unparalleled in history, are now public knowledge, still recruits its thousands and holds its millions—among them some of the best minds alive. Look at Klaus Fuchs, standing in the London dock, quiet, doomed, destroyed, and say whether it is possible to answer in that way the simple question: Why?

First, let me try to say what Communism is not. It is not simply a vicious plot hatched by wicked men in a sub-cellar. It is not just the writings of Marx and Lenin, dialectical materialism, the Politburo, the labor theory of value, the theory of the general strike, the Red Army, secret police, labor camps, underground conspiracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the technique of the coup d'état. It is not even those chanting, bannered millions that stream periodically, like disorganized armies through the heart of the world's capitals: Moscow, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Rome. These are expressions of Communism, but they are not what Communism is about.

In the Hiss trials, where Communism was a haunting specter, but which did little or nothing to explain Communism, Communists were assumed to be criminals, pariahs, clandestine men who lead double lives under false names, travel on false passports, deny traditional religion, morality, the sanctity of oaths, preach violence and practice treason. These things are true about Communists, but they are not what Communism is about.

The revolutionary heart of Communism is not the theatrical appeal: "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains. You have a world to gain." It is a simple statement of Karl Marx, further simplified for handy use: "Philosophers have explained the world; it is necessary to change the world." Communists are bound together by no secret oath. The tie that binds them across the frontiers of nations, across barriers of language and differences of class and education, in defiance of religion, morality, truth, law, honor, the weaknesses of the body and the irresolutions of the mind, even unto death, is a simple conviction: It is necessary to change the world. Their power, whose nature baffles the rest of the world, because in a large measure the rest of the world has lost that power, is the power to hold convictions and to act on them. It is the same power that moves mountains; it is also an unfailing power to move men. Communists are that part of mankind which has recovered the power to live or die—to bear witness—for its faith. And it is a simple, rational faith that inspires men to live or die for it.

It is not new. It is, in fact, man's second oldest faith. Its promise was whispered in the first days of the Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: "Ye shall be as gods." It is the great alternative faith of mankind. Like all great faiths, its force derives from a simple vision. Other ages have had great visions. They have always been different versions of the same vision: the vision of God and man's relationship to God. The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God.

It is the vision of man's mind displacing God as the creative intelligence of the world. It is the vision of man's liberated mind, by the sole force of its rational intelligence, redirecting man's destiny and reorganizing man's life and the world. It is the vision of man, once more the central figure of the Creation, not because God made man in His image, but because man's mind makes him the most intelligent of the animals. Copernicus and his successors displaced man as the central fact of the universe by proving that the earth was not the central star of the universe. Communism restores man to his sovereignty by the simple method of denying God.

The vision is a challenge and implies a threat. It challenges man to prove by his acts that he is the masterwork of the Creation—by making thought and act one. It challenges him to prove it by using the force of his rational mind to end the bloody meaningless-ness of man's history—by giving

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