Cold War Character Still Hot

By Glenn C. Altschuler
March 24, 2009 | 4:31 p.m.

Alger Hiss
and the Battle for History
By Susan Jacoby.
Yale University Press. 256 pp. $24.

When Susan Jacoby told her 86-year-old mother about her most recent book subject, she got this response: “Who cares about that anymore?” With the end of the Cold War, her mother implied, generations of Americans had completely forgotten about Alger Hiss, and those who hadn’t had stopped wondering long ago whether he was a victim of anti-Communist hysteria.

But Ms. Jacoby, an independent scholar and the author of The Age of American Unreason, a lament for the loss of intellectualism, doesn’t agree with her mother. In Alger Hiss and the Battle for History, she argues that Hiss remains a marker and metaphor in our intellectual culture, striking chords “located along ideological fault lines that, in spite of cultural shifts, extend from the 1930s to the present.” Conservative scholars of history, she writes, continue to use the Hiss case to link power-hungry intellectuals with anti-American liberalism; to raise questions about their loyalty, patriotism and commitment to national security; and to portray the New Deal, and the Great Society, as insidious attempts to replace free enterprise capitalism with state-sponsored socialism.

Alger Hiss and the Battle for History provides a timely reminder that even though economic and geopolitical realities “have undergone vast changes” in the past few decades, intellectuals on the right and the left in the United States still argue about the past as if it were the present. However, Ms. Jacoby’s own
evidence at times undercuts her claim that the Hiss case has continued to play an important role in our increasingly polarized politics.

Looking back, Hiss’ contradictory testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in 1948; Whitaker Chambers’ disclosure of State Department microfilms encased in a pumpkin on his Maryland farm; and Hiss’ perjury conviction did of course heighten public awareness of the danger of Communist subversion at a time when more than half of Americans were not familiar with the phrase “cold war.” But by the late ’50s, Ms. Jacoby admits, Hiss was “yesterday’s news.” Interest in the infiltration of government by Reds was fading, as was respect for informers.

Hiss resurfaced in the 1960s and ’70s as the victim of the unethical, opportunist, Red-baiting Richard Nixon, and as the embodiment of a multilateral foreign policy: Like Daniel Ellsberg, supporters suggested, he answered to higher, anti-fascist ends. Ms. Jacoby admits, however, that he was scarcely “in the forefront of anyone’s mind in a country still being torn apart by the Vietnam War.” Nor did the Hiss case mean much to the majority of college students who occupied buildings between 1967 and 1971.

By the late 1970s, most anti-Communist liberals became convinced that Hiss had lied to HUAC, and spied for the Soviet Union when he worked for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the State Department in the 1930s and ’40s. So with the publication in 1978 of Perjury by Allen Weinstein, then a professor at Smith College and now the United States archivist, Ms. Jacoby indicates, Hiss’ die-hard defenders found themselves outside the mainstream of scholarly and political discourse. The consensus around Hiss’ guilt grew even stronger after the implosion of the Soviet Union, when the K.G.B. and the C.I.A. released classified documents describing the activities of an American espionage agent with the code name “Ales.”

Ronald Reagan, of course, took Hiss’ guilt for granted. In 1984, he awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously to Whitaker Chambers. A year earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court denied Hiss’ petition to vacate his conviction because errors of fact had generated manifest unfairness during his trial. Because Hiss remained fixated on the “facts” of his case, Ms. Jacoby writes, even sympathetic journalists in the age of glasnost and perestroika portrayed him as, at best, an ambiguous figure, possibly a martyr, “even if he is probably not one.”

The consensus about Hiss, Ms. Jacoby concludes, is not matched by a consensus on whether the United States was damaged more by American Communists or the anti-Communist crusade. And that debate continues to matter because an analogous one is now being conducted over torture, warrantless wiretaps and the rights of detainees at Guantánamo Bay. The “real significance” of Hiss’ fate, Ms. Jacoby writes, “revolves around the question of whether the normal, self-correcting, legally sanctioned mechanisms of a democratic society can be trusted, in times of fear and genuine danger, to preserve national security without violating individual rights and constitutional traditions.” She believes they can. And so does Barack Obama.

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