

## Why Did I. F. Stone Sidestep the Hiss Case?

*By Max Holland*

Any reconsideration of [I. F. Stone](#) should specifically address how he viewed the Cold War spy and loyalty controversies—or chose not to—even if one accepts a minimalist interpretation of Stone’s brushes with Soviet intelligence.

Stone often commented about the cases that rocked the country in the late 1940s and were responsible for the repression, fear, and culture of conformity that he repeatedly decried. Most frequently, Stone wrote in passionate defense of government officials, high and low, who had been unfair targets of smears and leaks, sometimes when their real crime was to have opposed a powerful congressman on a point of policy. One such occasion was the March 1948 attack by Representative [J. Parnell Thomas](#) (R-NJ), chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee, on a government physicist named [Edward U. Condon](#). (Condon had been a prime mover in asserting postwar civilian control over nuclear energy, which Thomas had bitterly opposed). In the summer of 1949, Stone wrote a stinging series of articles in defense of Condon, all of which roundly attacked J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI for compiling the innuendo that Thomas had used in his blundering effort to destroy the outspoken physicist, who also happened to be Stone’s friend.<sup>[1]</sup>

The case in which Stone became the most personally involved was the prosecution of [Julius](#) and [Ethel Rosenberg](#)—but not during their sensational trial, when he stayed uncharacteristically silent. Because he did not want to “play into the hands of reaction,” he eschewed the “shrill, hysterical and mendacious” propaganda campaign that insisted the Rosenbergs were completely innocent and victims of a heinous government frame-up. Instead, he attempted to sit on the fence: “we just don’t know” whether the Rosenbergs are guilty or innocent, Stone wrote.<sup>[2]</sup> When he did become fully engaged, it was to crusade against the great and unfair disparity between their death sentences and the limited prison terms meted out to others convicted of nuclear espionage.<sup>[3]</sup>

Although Stone mainly railed against the injustices that occurred, he was also prone to discounting the significance of a given spy case and insisting that the truly bad actor was some element of the US government. That was the line of argument he employed when the first spy case, involving a foreign policy journal called *Amerasia*, broke in June 1945. Stone was quick to suggest—falsely—that the prosecution was the work of a “reactionary clique” inside the State Department, which, among other things, was scheming to save Japan from decisive defeat so that it could be preserved as a bulwark against Soviet socialism.<sup>[4]</sup> Four years later, in a similar vein, Stone hammered on the theme of FBI

misconduct during the first trial in the [Judith Coplon](#) espionage case, until her own appearance on the witness stand proved disastrous to her credibility.<sup>[5]</sup> Decades later, he disingenuously suggested that [Victor Perlo](#), his former source at the War Production Board, had been unjustifiably “purged” from the federal government. “Now he would have been a sitting duck if he was passing any secrets,” Stone observed. “But the government never laid a finger on him.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Stone also routinely denigrated the testimony and motives of former Communists-turned- informants. [Whittaker Chambers](#), naturally, was an object of particular scorn. Stone was one of the “angriest” critics of *Witness*, Chambers’s confessional autobiography.<sup>[7]</sup> Renegades and deserters such as Chambers, Stone claimed, were full of self-hate for abandoning their Communist faith—self-loathing that manifested itself as bitterness toward their former comrades. With such twisted feelings, informants were hardly equipped to supply reliable or objective observations about Communism in the United States.<sup>[8]</sup> Other informants who were special targets of Stone’s disdain, despite the essential accuracy of their testimony, were [Louis F. Budenz](#), the former managing editor of the [Daily Worker](#), and [Elizabeth Bentley](#), a KGB courier and go-between from 1939 to 1944. Budenz, who knew Stone’s brother, had the “glibness of a traveling evangelist describing the details of hell,” according to Stone.<sup>[9]</sup> Stone likewise intimated that Bentley, whose 1948 revelations did so much to shape public attitudes toward Soviet espionage and the complicity of the US Communist Party (CPUSA) in those activities, was unreliable, cowardly, and prone to dramatic exaggerations—besides exemplifying another case of governmental misconduct.<sup>[10]</sup>

Stone’s first and foremost concern was the meta-narrative—the political exploitation of and repercussions from the espionage cases, even decades after they had ceased dominating the news. In the mid-1980s, Stone was still arguing that the government’s attack on the CPUSA’s involvement in espionage was a concerted effort to scare liberals away from voting for Henry Wallace in 1948.<sup>[11]</sup> Sometimes, Stone’s concern over how the espionage cases played out politically was exhibited in very curious ways. In 1983, for example, Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton were putting the finishing touches on *The Rosenberg File*.<sup>[12]</sup> They wanted to open the book with a 1956 passage from Stone that seemed germane: “[It will be a long time, if ever, before we know \[the truth\] for certain. . . . But I doubt whether we will ever find there was a deliberate frame-up. Fanaticism had the same momentum on both sides.](#)” The quote seemed appropriate because Radosh and Milton were confident that they had discerned the elusive truth. Indeed, Stone privately expressed agreement with their view of the case after a long personal briefing during which Radosh presented his and Milton’s findings.<sup>[13]</sup>

When Stone received a copy of the galleys, however, and saw his words quoted in the front matter, he went “ballistic,” according to Radosh. Apparently, to agree privately with the book was one thing and to be associated with it publicly was quite another. Stone demanded that the quoted passage be removed because he insisted it was akin to a blurb: it implied an endorsement of the book. He threatened to sue the authors and the publisher unless it was taken out. Radosh replied that the quote reflected the authors’ approval of Stone for being one of the few on the left who had questioned the propaganda campaign

of the 1950s and did not buy into the cult of the Rosenbergs. Eventually, Stone relented, though he also had no choice legally.[\[14\]](#)

That episode might be written off, except that it was preceded six years earlier by another puzzling response to an old controversy. In 1976, Holt, Rinehart & Winston published a new book on the [Alger Hiss](#) case, *Alger Hiss: The True Story*, by John Chabot Smith, a former reporter for the defunct *New York Herald Tribune* who had covered both of Hiss's trials. [The New York Review of Books](#) commissioned Allen Weinstein, who was working on his own lengthy study of the case, to [review](#) the book, which portrayed Hiss as the victim of a government frame-up. Weinstein by this point not only had come to a different conclusion but had also sued the FBI to gain access to 15,376 pages of documents on the Hiss case, records that Smith had never seen. Weinstein "lit into Hiss [and Smith's book] with such enthusiasm and authority" that his six-page review became a front-page story in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* even before it appeared in *The New York Review of Books*.[\[15\]](#)

Stone was among the first to respond to Weinstein, leaping to Hiss's defense in a rare departure from his normal pose of agnosticism about that case.[\[16\]](#) In a [New York Times](#) op-ed article, Stone presented a "new revelation," which he claimed was a "tantalizing loose thread . . . [that if firmly pulled] might unravel the melodramatic web woven a quarter century ago around the notorious pumpkin papers." Those papers, "as everyone knows, were the centerpiece and symbol of the postwar witch hunt. . . . [and] had distinct elements of stage-managed fraud," asserted Stone.[\[17\]](#) What Stone did privately was just as striking. He believed that *The New York Review of Books* had been grossly unfair to Smith: "Before [his] book had a chance to be evaluated, even read, it was really destroyed by Weinstein." Stone was particularly upset because the right wing had taken great delight in having such an article about the Hiss case published in *The New York Review of Books*, the citadel of left/liberal thought. Stone did not want to bear responsibility for an editorial decision he deeply disagreed with and had not been consulted about, so he resigned as a contributing editor of the *Review*.[\[18\]](#)

Although this episode is interesting in and of itself, its most significant aspect is to underscore a blank space. Despite Stone's prodigious output of books, articles, and essays, and his reputation as the outstanding investigative reporter of his generation, he wrote next to nothing about the government's prosecution of Alger Hiss, the case that put a generation on trial. During the two-and-a-half years it took for the Hiss controversy to wend its way through Congress and all the way up to the Supreme Court, Stone was completely silent about the most potent and politically damaging case of them all. Writers are seldom criticized for what they do not write, and rightly so. But given the centrality of the Hiss case to the domestic Cold War, the omission is striking and Stone's later explanation not credible when one thinks about it. Stone was seldom, if ever, at a loss for words or an opinion, and his curiosity was relentless.

Stone's answer for this lacuna—what he himself might have termed a "significant trifle"—seems to have been that he "was never able to make up [his] mind about Hiss," although there are grounds to doubt even that.[\[19\]](#) Given what is now known about

Stone's own dalliances with Soviet intelligence, a more accurate answer may be that Stone deliberately shied away from writing about the Hiss controversy at its height—except to disparage Chambers—because Stone had learned or suspected that the charges were likely true, and the case therefore cut too close to home. Stone, too, had consciously cooperated with Soviet intelligence, even if he never came close to being the kind of agent Hiss was. Writing about the Hiss case would have been akin to writing about himself in a sense and would have necessarily involved revisiting decisions made in the context of the 1930s. In all likelihood, any effort by Stone to write honestly about the Hiss case would have been seized on and misused by what he saw as his lifelong foe, the forces of reaction.

Stone was an authentic, muckraking radical in the best American tradition. Yet he also personifies, perhaps uniquely, the tragic encounter between indigenous radicalism and Soviet Communism during the twentieth century, including the subordination of the former to the latter for decades, resulting in the enervation and long decline of the progressive impulse in American political life.

To paraphrase George Orwell, Stone's sin was being anti-fascist without being, for too long, anti-totalitarian.

[1] I. F. Stone (hereafter Stone), "Debunking FBI Alibis in the Condon Case," *Daily Compass*, 15 June 1949; Stone, "Definitive Analysis of How FBI Works," *Daily Compass*, 16 June 1949; Stone, "Continuing Analysis of J. E. Hoover's Letter," *Daily Compass*, 17 June 1949; and Stone, "Policing Thoughts Is Bad in Any Political System," *Daily Compass*, 19 June 1949. For a balanced account of the HUAC attack on Condon, see Walter Goodman, *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), 231–239.

[2] Stone, "[Time for New Tactics on Rosenberg-Sobell, Too](#)," *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, 2 July 1956; Andrew Patner, *I. F. Stone: A Portrait* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 83–84, 87.

[3] Myra MacPherson, "*All Governments Lie*": *The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I. F. Stone* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006), 297–298.

[4] Stone, "[Arrest of 'the Six'](#)," *The Nation*, 16 June 1945. The investigation had been instigated by an Office of Strategic Services officer in February 1945 after he was stunned to find nearly verbatim passages in *Amerasia* from a report he had written on British-American relations in Southeast Asia. For a good overview of a complicated affair, see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Early Cold War Spies: The Espionage Trials That Shaped American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 25–48.

[5] Stone, “Why Didn’t the FBI Look in Judy’s Locker?” *Daily Compass*, 20 June 1949; Stone, “What FBI Men Withheld about Coplon Love Tiff,” *Daily Compass*, 21 June 1949; Stone, “Vice Squad Methods in the Coplon Case,” *Daily Compass*, 23 June 1949; and Stone, “The Coplon Verdict,” *Daily Compass*, 3 July 1949. Coplon was a Justice Department employee who passed information about FBI operations against Soviet agents to the KGB. Haynes and Klehr, *Early Cold War Spies*, 192–207.

[6] Patner, *Stone: A Portrait*, 86. In 1944–1945, [Perlo](#) was the ringleader of one of the most active espionage groups in the US government, a fact known to the FBI by 1947 via the VENONA intercepts. None of the Perlo group members was ever prosecuted, however, because the government did not want to disclose the VENONA secret in court, and the only other evidence—[Elizabeth Bentley](#)’s sworn testimony—was insufficient to gain a conviction. See Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1999), 223–237; and John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *VENONA: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 123–129. Stone also defended [Cedric Belfrage](#) (another Soviet agent) as an alleged victim of an overzealous government. See Stone, “[How Long Will Our Liberal Editors Remain Silent about Belfrage?](#)” *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*, 23 May 1955, 4.

[7] Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 469.

[8] “Star Performers in the Witch Hunt,” in Stone, *The Truman Era* (New York: Random House, 1972), 182–190. The three articles on Chambers were originally published in *The Daily Compass* on 12–14 February 1952.

[9] Stone, “Budenz: Portrait of a Christian Hero,” in Stone, *Truman Era*, 190–193. The article was originally published in *The Daily Compass*, 23 April 1950.

[10] Stone, “The Test of the Latest Bentley ‘Sensation,’” *Daily Compass*, 7 June 1949; and Stone, “[Eye-Opener: Bentley’s One Conviction in that ‘Spy’ Ring](#),” *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*, 30 November 1953, 2.

[11] Patner, *Stone: A Portrait*, 86.

[12] Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983).

[13] Ronald Radosh, “[Romancing I. F. Stone](#),” *The New Criterion*, November 2006, 9.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Robert Sherrill, “[Alger Hiss](#),” *New York Times Book Review*, 25 April 1976; Peter Kihss, “[Professor Says Alger Hiss Lied about His Links with Chambers](#),” *New York Times*, 18 March 1976; William Chapman, “[Hiss a Liar, Case Expert Concludes](#),”

*Washington Post*, 19 March 1976; Allen Weinstein, “[Was Alger Hiss Framed?](#)” *New York Review of Books*, 1 April 1976, 16–18; and G. Edward White, *Alger Hiss’s Looking-Glass Wars: The Covert Life of a Soviet Spy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 184–186.

[16] Just before Stone’s *Times* op-ed article was published, he declined to participate in a survey of elite opinion about the Hiss case. Philip Nobile, “[The State of the Art of Alger Hiss](#),” *Harper’s*, April 1976, 73. Subsequently, Stone told Patner in the mid-1980s, “[T]here’s a whole spectrum of possibilities, and a lot of gray areas in [the Hiss] case.” See Patner, *Stone: A Portrait*, 86.

[17] Stone, “[The ‘Flimflam’ in the Pumpkin Papers](#),” *New York Times*, 1 April 1976. Stone’s op-ed was grossly misleading and a piece of pettifoggery. He highlighted trivial documents found on the “pumpkin papers” microfilm, which Chambers said had come from another agent, Ward Pigman. Stone also pretended that these mundane documents were representative of Chambers’s evidence against Hiss, which clearly was not the case.

[18] Patner, *Stone: A Portrait*, 84–85.

[19] *Ibid.*, 85. Stone often observed that the key to good reporting was an ability to notice the “significant trifle.” See Don Guttenplan, [American Radical: The Life and Times of I. F. Stone](#) (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), 476. Given Stone’s sources on the left, if he cared to inquire he could have learned earlier than most what [Nathaniel Weyl](#) told a Senate panel in 1952: that Hiss was a member of a Communist cell inside the federal government as of 1934. Indeed, Victor Perlo knew Hiss to be a Soviet agent, though Perlo was not likely to disclose that to Stone. See “[Writer Calls Hiss Red Cell Member](#),” *New York Times*, 20 February 1952; Kareem Fahim, “[Nathaniel Weyl, Author Who Testified on Alger Hiss, Dies at 94](#),” *New York Times*, 8 May 2005; and John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev, [Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America](#) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 13–14.