

Still Witnessing: The Enduring Relevance of Whittaker Chambers

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Abstract: *Whittaker Chambers is best known today as the veteran Soviet spy who became, in William F. Buckley Jr.'s words, "the most important American defector from Communism" when he testified against members of his underground Communist cell in the 1930s. Yet Chambers did more than reject Communism: He revealed a key problem with modern liberalism. In his now-classic autobiography Witness, he argued that Communism ought to be rejected in the name of something other than 20th-century modern liberalism by showing how the two grew out of a common ideology that places unbounded confidence in state power. As he remarked, New Deal acolytes had no principled reason for opposing unlimited state intrusion into the social, economic, and political realms. Herein lies the source of Chambers' ongoing relevance: While Communism stands discredited, many still accept its fundamental conceit that man makes his own reality and that the government is the solution to all our ills.*

Imagine a disheveled, eccentric, if not brilliant, journalist and essayist who wrote for one of the most consequential publications in the English-speaking world testifying to the much-maligned House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) about intricate Communist activity within the federal government. Imagine further that the disheveled journalist's testimony, disbelieved by virtually the entire ruling political class, would send to federal prison for perjury a former high servant of the New Deal and current president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Alger Hiss.

Moreover, this journalist's testimony knocked the bloom off the rose of American progressivism and

represented the first time that a conservative would deeply resonate with the American people about the challenge that progressivism was issuing to constitutional government.

Rapidly coalescing around that journalist were the fragmentary pieces of the American Right who found in his courage, his words, and the facts he presented a rallying point for their own fledgling conservative faith. Thus began the greatest division in postwar American politics, a division that prepared the ground for another half-century of political fighting for the very soul of America.

The troubled journalist was Whittaker Chambers, a man known to many Americans in 1948—when he

first testified before HUAC—as a superb writer in the Henry Luce media empire at *Time*. Chambers, however, had also been an underground member of the Fourth Section of Soviet Military Intelligence and had betrayed his country.

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Chambers divulged his traitorous conduct because he came to understand the intrinsic evil of his former commitment to Communism. Driving Chambers' painful insights into his ideological commitments were the Stalinist purges and his existential conversion to Christianity. From this conversion emerged his desire to immolate himself before Congress and the country if it meant that America would finally understand its existential Communist foe.

Yet Chambers did more than simply testify about espionage. Standing apart from liberal anti-Communists, he forcefully argued in his epic autobiography *Witness* that Communism must be rejected in the name of something other than 20th-century modern liberalism.

Chambers' enduring relevance abides in his diagnosis of a West "sick to death" from the philosophical and religious choices it had made in the modern era. Man had too easily concluded that he creates his reality through his own mind and consent. In the 20th century, the horrific consequences for the human person, for liberty, and for civilization itself were the piles of dead bodies sacrificed by the terror regimes in pursuit of a liberationist politics that ended in man organizing the world against man.

The West itself, Chambers feared, was listless at the moment when it most needed strength. Chambers argued that the West's weakness grew out of its tacit adoption of many of the philosophical errors on which

Communism rested. A larger Western conversion, Chambers boldly urged, similar in many respects to his personal conversion would have to be made if Communism and its philosophical underpinnings were to be defeated. The West would have to emerge from its deep-seated materialism, its confusion over the nature of the person and his dignity, and its detached understanding of the free society's conservative origins. This could happen, Chambers observed, only if the West reengaged the truth about God and man.

Chambers' diagnosis troubles us today because of the West's retention of so many of the ideas that shaped Communism. We still remain distant, if not cut off, from the intellectual and religious sources that shaped the West from its beginning. The contemporary West still asserts that reality should be understood through empirical reason alone, that man is merely a highly evolved creature; or, alternatively, it states that liberty is only a useful fiction because history, science, economics, and the state are the real movers carrying man forward.

Chambers' witness and writings controvert this ideological reduction of man. Before considering Chambers in depth, however, we should first understand his life and the significance of the Hiss case.

UP FROM COMMUNISM: THE LIFE OF WHITTAKER CHAMBERS

Whittaker Chambers was born in Philadelphia in 1901 and grew up in what was then a largely unsettled Long Island, New York. Chambers attended Columbia University for three years and was noticed for exceptional writing talent. Failing to graduate, he left under less than favorable circumstances and soon began his tragic intellectual odyssey.

Propelled by the failure of his middle-class family and the seeming chaos of the early 20th century, Chambers embraced revolutionary ideology as the definitive solution to the "total crisis." In recognition of his superior ideological commitment to Communism, he was tapped to become an underground

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agent for the Soviet Union in 1932. Before going underground as a Soviet spy, Chambers had been known as “the hottest literary Bolshevik” in New York. He received critical admiration for his writing in Communist-controlled publications like the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*.¹

Chambers served in the Fourth Section of Soviet Military Intelligence as a courier and contact, filling an unglamorous role of ferrying documents and arranging clandestine meetings. The members of the Communist cell that Chambers led during the 1930s in Washington, D.C., consisted of journalists and civil servants of varying degrees of importance working in the federal government.² Chambers remained in

¹ Whittaker Chambers' short story “You Can Make Out Their Voices” was published in the March 1931 issue of *New Masses* and was widely recognized as an example of excellent socialist writing. The story was adapted as a play (retitled “Can You Hear Their Voices?”) and performed at Vassar College and in radical theatre throughout Europe, including Russia, China, and Australia. For the text of “You Can Make Out Their Voices,” see Albert Fried, ed., *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 185–194, at <http://books.google.com/books?id=mLJbT3NMbN4C&pg=PA185&dq=%22whittaker+chambers%22+voices&sig=3xOtX-aiHkwISsx7ovNPzKYnPI4#v=onepage&q=%22whittaker%20chambers%22%20voices&f=false> (March 7, 2011).

² Curiously, Alger Hiss, who held a high-ranking post at the State Department, was not the highest-ranking official within Chambers' group. Harry Dexter White, an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, co-creator of the International Monetary Fund, and an architect of American postwar monetary policy, had also figured in Chambers' activities. He was identified by both Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley, “the blond spy queen,” as someone who engaged in espionage activity. He died the day after his testimony to HUAC at his summer residence in New Hampshire, 15 minutes after the conclusion of Alger Hiss's first closed-session interrogation.

his espionage post until his exit from Communism in 1938. The moral bankruptcy of Communism, as evidenced in the murderous Stalinist purges, combined with credible fear of being recalled for liquidation to the Soviet Union fueled his exodus.

Providing the crucial moment of transcendence for Chambers was the Christian gospel. From it, Chambers finally grasped that Communist revolutionary ideology lied about the nature of man and the source of his being. Chambers movingly noted that it was the shape of his daughter's ears and the screams silently heard by all Communists from their victims that made him face the presence of God. As Chambers observed, “A Communist breaks because he must choose at last between irreconcilable opposites—God or Man, Soul or Mind, Freedom or Communism.”³

Chambers was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1948 to testify about Communist espionage. HUAC wanted Chambers to confirm the testimony of Elizabeth Bentley, another former Communist agent who had turned on the party and was now divulging espionage information to the federal government. Bentley, however, came under brutal assault and had lost much credibility. Chambers was needed to confirm and bolster her explosive testimony.⁴

Coming forward initially in 1939 to disclose the espionage cell he had directed to Assistant Secretary of State Adolf A. Berle, Chambers was likewise a potentially explosive source of information about Communist activity inside the federal government. Of the 21 names he gave to the committee, many per-

³ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1980), p. 16.

⁴ See *Hearings Regarding Communist Espionage in the United States Government*, Committee on Un-American Activities, U.S. House of Representatives, 80th Cong., 2nd Sess., July 31; August 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 20, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30; September 8 and 9, 1948, at http://www.archive.org/stream/hearingsregardin1948unit/hearingsregardin1948unit_djvu.txt (March 7, 2011).

sonified the progressive movement's understanding of government administration and service.⁵

Indeed, in the case of Alger Hiss, his resumé, qualifications, political ideals, and seeming patriotism made it impossible for many, including even some members of the committee, to contemplate him as one

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who could betray his country. Richard Nixon was a significant exception.⁶ Then a freshman Congressman from California, Nixon knew of Hiss's activities before the HUAC hearings.

Nixon carried Chambers' accusations through a decidedly unfavorable environment and made it possible for the case to persist. HUAC members were initially fearful that Chambers was lying, so overwhelming had been Hiss's first statement to the committee.

⁵ John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 30. This book releases even more information extracted from Soviet archives and concludes that all 21 of those who were named by Chambers before HUAC were involved in Soviet espionage activity.

⁶ Allen Weinstein, *Perjury* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), pp. 7, 16. Weinstein's history of the Hiss–Chambers case remains a definitive account of the events that unfolded. The book also diminished many of the revisionist arguments made in the aftermath of Watergate that attempted to rehabilitate the case for Hiss's innocence. On the subject of Nixon's knowledge of accusations made against Hiss prior to Chambers' testimony before HUAC, Weinstein noted: "Shortly after Nixon entered Congress, a Democratic colleague, Charles Kersten of Wisconsin, took him to Baltimore for the first of several meetings with a Catholic priest named John Cronin, who specialized in collecting data on Communist infiltration. He had access to FBI files and, in 1945, produced a confidential report to the American Catholic bishops, 'The Problem of American Communism.'" (p. 7). Weinstein further observed that Nixon had read the report, which prominently featured accusations against Hiss.

An upstaged Chambers seemed to hold the promise of embarrassment for HUAC, a reality it had experienced even when its instincts had been confirmed. Nixon studied Hiss's first statement and noted to other committee members that Hiss's seemingly outright denials of Chambers' charges were pregnant with evasions.

In the end, the weight of Chambers' testimony, rendered in the Cannon House Office Building on August 3, 1948, would help to seal the fate of Alger Hiss. Chambers would continue to write and, perhaps more important, correspond until his death in 1961. Of note in this period is Chambers' contribution for almost two years, from 1957–1959, to William F. Buckley's *National Review*. He wrote several significant pieces on Ayn Rand, civil liberties, and the real costs of government intervention on personal freedom.

Chambers' legacy for American conservatism lies in his testimony against Alger Hiss and the prose of *Witness*, which stands as one of the truly excellent American autobiographies. Paul Kengor, author of *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life*,⁷ records that Reagan had great confidence in Chambers' prescriptions

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from the moment he first read *Witness*. Reagan memorized entire passages of the autobiography and often inserted them whole cloth into his speeches against Communism during his presidency. He awarded Chambers, posthumously, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1984.

William F. Buckley, the conservative thinker and builder *par excellence*, continuously looked to the older and battle-hardened Chambers for guidance, if not the voice of conscience, in his own conservative labors. Evi-

⁷ Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

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dent in their correspondence and in Buckley's attempt to enlist Chambers as a founding editor of *National Review* was the esteem that each had for the other. Of Chambers, Buckley wrote, "his voice had been and still is...magnificent in tone, speaking to our time from the center of sorrow, from the center of the earth."⁸

Chambers instructed in his autobiography *Witness*, published in 1952, that his witness was only partially about espionage and betrayal. Emanating from his witness was the warning that America's progressive rulers were perhaps politically unable to form and maintain such a commitment.

In his conversion from that most modern of intellectual diseases, Communism, his acceptance of Christianity, and his resolute defense of the American nation in the early Cold War period, Whittaker Chambers exemplified the surest path to liberty in an age of ideological falsehoods. Chambers' negative witness against Alger Hiss, Soviet Communism, and the exuberant confidence in planning displayed by New Deal-era progressives and, alternatively, his positive witness for liberty and truth, for man's need of the transcendent, and for the ground of self-government forged the unity of a previously disparate conservatism. Chambers stood almost alone in his contention that Communism must be rejected in the name of something other than modern liberalism.

Related to this proposition was Chambers' counsel that political freedom must be independently grounded in God, the human soul, and the irreducible digni-

ty of the person—what Chambers termed the biblical understanding of man. As he wrote in *Witness*, "political freedom, as the Western world has known it, is only a political reading of the Bible."⁹ These propositions make Whittaker Chambers a dissident voice within the modern political experience. If Communism and progressivism were the effectual truth of philosophic modernity, as Chambers urged, then their defeat had to come from outside the well-worn path of hyper-rationalist thought.

THE PROBLEMATIC MODERN UNDERPINNINGS OF COMMUNISM

Driving Chambers' conversion was the clarity of thought he received from Christianity, which helped him locate and then describe in *Witness* the profound errors within certain strains of modern thought that had erected Communist ideology. *Witness* ranges far beyond the motivations of his testimony against Hiss or even the state of American politics. The power of the text emerges from the sources of intellectual and spiritual strength that lifted Chambers above the maddening ideology he had served. The manifold meanings contained in its title point to Chambers' lasting significance as a thinker and writer about the condition of modernity, the nature of ideology, the irrepressible feature of religion in human nature, and politics.

The meaning he ascribed to his conversion underscored how the political distortions of the 20th century emerged from the philosophical errors that had preceded them. Unlike many Western intellectuals who left Communism because of the Stalinist purges in the 1930s but remained committed to various shades of socialist politics, Chambers experienced a conversion that was root and branch. He described his exit from Communism in this manner:

What I had been fell from me like dirty rags. The rags that fell from me were not only Commu-

⁸ William F. Buckley Jr., "The End of Whittaker Chambers," *Esquire*, September 1962, pp. 77–82, 162–172.

⁹ Chambers, *Witness*, p. 16.

nism. What fell was the whole web of the materialist modern mind—the luminous shroud which it has spun about the spirit of man, paralyzing in the name of rationalism the instinct of his soul for God, denying in the name of knowledge the reality of the soul and its birthright in that mystery on which mere knowledge falters and shatters at every step. If I had rejected only Communism, I would have rejected only one political expression of the modern mind, the most logical because the most brutal in enforcing the myth of man’s material perfectibility.¹⁰

This statement exemplifies Chambers’ notion that much of modern thought enthroned the autonomy of reason. The problem was that man’s belief that he could order his existence without the insights of biblical religion and premodern philosophy had not equaled liberation but instead had left the human person in the grip of naked power. Not one to deny the work of reason and its progress in the modern era, Chambers stated that man now placed himself above God and demanded the transformation of both matter and man.

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In this observation, Chambers acutely grasped that the Continental Enlightenment’s confidence in geometric reasoning to grasp the final truth of politics and economics merged in the 19th century with a progressive understanding of history. This convergence led to the ideological turn in Western thought and politics. History was now issuing into completion and needed only the power of the state to push it forward. The dignity of the person was easily ignored under revolu-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

tionary ideology. Liberty of thought and action were no longer possible or necessary.

On this moment’s consequences Chambers looked to the Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac, who wrote: “It is not true, as is sometimes said, that man cannot organize the world without God. What is true is that, without God, he can ultimately only organize it against man.”¹¹ Chambers added, “The gas ovens of Buchenwald and the Communist execution cellars exist first within our minds.”¹²

Chambers’ existential conversion involved far more than merely rejecting Communism. He believed that his personal turn from revolutionary ideology was exemplary for the denizens of modernity. The intellectual and spiritual recovery he made was crucial to the West’s overcoming of Communism, Chambers held.

The plunge Chambers made into Communism resulted from his belief that the modern world was sick. Visiting an inflation-ridden Germany in the aftermath of World War I had only confirmed this insight for him. In joining the Communist movement, Chambers noted that his belief was not based on Marxist economics or its purported understanding of the laws of history. Chambers thought that the modern world’s gaping crises had now found their answer in a new vision of man and the world. On the ennobling demands of Communism, he observed that “It summons men to overcome the crisis, which, Communism claims, is in effect a crisis of rending frustration, with the world, unable to stand still, but unwilling to go forward along the road that the logic of a technological civilization points out—Communism.”¹³ For this vision men find a “reason to live, and a reason to die.”¹⁴

Turning away from this ideological vision left its own mark on Chambers. As he wrote, “So great an effort, quite apart from its physical and practical haz-

¹¹ Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 15.

¹² Chambers, *Witness*, p. 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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ards, cannot occur without a profound upheaval of the spirit. No man lightly reverses the faith of an adult lifetime, held implacably to the point of criminality.¹⁵ Chambers reflected in the winter of 1937—the interlude between his interior decision to leave Communism and his actual departure—on these lines from John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*:

Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver.
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves.¹⁶

Chambers once believed that Communism could liberate a captive humanity. Now he confronted his own life and the true irony of self-knowledge, which informed him of his grievous error. Chambers had met with his own prophet Nathan, who told him, “thou art the man.” On offer for Chambers was the paradoxical knowledge that humiliation can bring to man. In rejecting Communist ideology, he re-embraced the authentic, if limited, liberation that Western thought had formerly known:

On one side of that moment were nearly forty years of human waste on all the paths and goat paths of 20th-century error and action. On the other side was humility and liberation, the sense that the strength would be given me to do whatever I must do, go wherever I must go.

The moment itself was something which to deny would be a blasphemy.¹⁷

The intellectual and spiritual resources lay dormant, Chambers believed, because nothing summoned them from the shades.

THE THREE POLES OF EXISTENCE: THE REVOLUTIONARY LIFE, BOURGEOIS SUCCESS, OR THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

Adding to Chambers' analysis of the particular mistakes in modern thought was his diagnosis of the two poles of existence open to men in late modernity: the revolutionary life or bourgeois success. Both failed to speak to man's authentic nature, Chambers argued.¹⁸ Chambers had lived both poles of existence. He had worked for the Communist revolution in its criminal underground, and he had found uncommon success as a journalist for *Time*. Neither had sated Chambers, and he believed this was a truth that many others also knew.

One might wonder whether Chambers was right in observing that one pole of existence in the modern world was the revolutionary position. While many intellectuals did not aspire to revolutionary upheaval, the doctrines that undergirded Communist thought surely informed much of what they did as authors, journalists, professors, civil servants, etc. Indeed, much of this thought remains regnant. The ideological foundations of the sexual revolution, feminism, the deconstruction of the family, and the intense hatred of both religion and markets incorporate much of revolutionary ideology.

Conversely, Chambers criticized the bourgeois spirit not for its promotion of material success but because it could conceive of higher goods only with great difficulty. The arc of its frenzied activity over time devalued the less productive but sublime achievements that

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 444.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

the West in former periods had understood and lived. Money could not really become the measure of all things if man was to flourish.

Chambers put forward a third possibility that spoke to the exceptionalism of man. This was the life of religious and moral desire marked by the awareness of man's profound incompleteness. These experiences of religion and morality were the only ones capable of giving "men the heart to suffer the ordeal of a life that perpetually rends them between its beauty and its

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terror."¹⁹ If Chambers' conversion was to be a definitive moment that summoned the sacrifice and courage of others to uphold America's and the West's political and spiritual principles, then an old and new ending for man would have to be recalled and re-presented. The heroic effort of the man of desire could have these exemplary consequences only if men recovered the quest for the truth about God and man.

UNBOUNDED HUMAN FREEDOM VS. GOD-GIVEN LIBERTY

Chambers' understanding of politics and power was rooted in his understanding of man's liberty and its foundation in God. Chambers recovered the pre-modern understanding of freedom as something intimately related to the discovery of truth because both are grounded in God. The implication of this freedom is that man is able, however incompletely, to know the truth about his being. As Chambers wrote:

Freedom is a need of the soul and nothing else.
It is in striving toward God that the soul strives

continually after a condition of freedom. God alone is the inciter and guarantor of freedom. He is the only guarantor. External freedom is only an aspect of interior freedom. Religion and freedom are indivisible. Without freedom the soul dies. Without the soul there is no justification for freedom.²⁰

Moreover, liberty is perverted by the modern project because it is tied to the masterful realization of self-sovereignty. In this view, nothing exists above the human will that can provide guidance and direction to liberty. Man chooses, consents to, and creates his own reality. The ideology of consent wages its own ruthless logic by abstracting man from his nature and purpose. For the reality that man created in the 20th century was the product of a ferocious striving for perfection. The paradox that Chambers noticed was that man's attempts to reclaim Eden only further removed him from the modest achievements he could obtain.

Additionally, when Chambers stated that "in striving toward God...the soul strives continually after a condition of freedom," he meant that man realizes his freedom most clearly when he begins to understand the limitations and agonies of his composite *being*. Anxiety and angst accompany the human person who shares similarities with the animals but who also possesses through reason and imagination a desire to mount higher. Man knows that his knowledge is limited, but in knowing his limits, he transcends them in certain degrees.²¹ His reason and capacity for immense creativity holds out to man the possibility of transcendence, of rising above the strife and suffering of his natural being. Therein rests the seeds of the ideological turn and its desire to possess Godlike assurance of knowledge.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²¹ *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers 1931–1959*, ed. Terry Teachout (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1984), pp. 184–193, 190.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

This was the source of Chambers' observation that Communism is as old as the lies whispered by the serpent in Eden. Man wanted to believe that he possessed all knowledge. Communist ideology proclaimed this anew in more striking formulations.

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Ideology promises man an objective, panoramic view of the cosmos, enabling him to transcend his very nature and begin the work of redeeming the world. Such ideological transcendence is a betrayal of man's finite and relative position within the universe. The power of this temptation exists in man's continuous desire to overcome his own limitedness. Adding to the intensity is original sin, which "explains why man's history even at its highest moments, is not a success story."²²

COMMUNISM AND THE MODERN PROMISE OF LIBERATION

The desire for transcendence was never more evident than in the hyper-rationalism of 20th-century social science, which proclaimed that man's refuge existed in the application of science to the political, economic, and social spheres. Rather than finding his liberation in hyper-rationalism, man more than ever now sought an ideology to soothe his existential angst. Ideology answered what had been stripped away in the "total crisis," or what Chambers identified as the result of the emptying of the West's spiritual reserves. Moreover, science and technology, and the gains these promised, were easily accommodated within the ideological vision. Indeed, the power of the Communist state seemed to coincide more perfectly with scientific mastery than did the free society.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Chambers reasoned that the Soviet Union's secret power was its philosophic materialism, the belief that empirically measurable reality was the only reality open to man. The West held a kindred faith in this transformative understanding of reality. The problematic aspect was that human mystery and limits were never accorded the dignity they deserved under this ranking of goods. This meant that man looked too much to material, scientific, and economic progress for the perfection of his nature. Even in the West, there was the creepy notion that if these were the primary goods, perhaps the command-control state was a better bargain for their achievement.

The significance for Chambers was that the materialism and unconscious atheism informally guiding the West may have objected to Communism but could not counter the narrative of man and his perfection put forward by Communism. The West was unable to defend freedom because freedom itself lacked content beyond material well-being.

Reversing the triumphalism of modern liberalism, Chambers argued that the Continental Enlightenment's confidence in man's reason had slowly undermined liberty and eventually had led to Communism:

Hence the Communist Party is quite justified in calling itself the most revolutionary party in history. It has posed in practical form the most revolutionary question in history: God or Man? It has taken the logical next step which three hundred years of rationalism hesitated to take, and said what millions of modern minds think, but do not dare or care to say: If man's mind is the decisive force in the world, what need is there for God? Henceforth man's mind is man's fate.²³

We now can understand Chambers' famous statement made to his wife upon exiting from his covert role in Soviet military intelligence: "You know, we

²³ Chambers, *Witness*, p. 10.

are leaving the winning world for the losing world."²⁴ When considered against the backdrop of the economic depression, the creeping centralization and weaknesses of Western democracies, and the sense that capitalism was deficient, this statement—made in 1938—may not be so shocking. Communism's moral authority was not yet undermined.

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News of the Stalinist atrocities had circulated in Western Communist circles, but the purges had also been strangely relativized by many devotees. As Hiss once noted to Chambers, "Yes, Stalin plays for keeps, doesn't he."²⁵ Indeed, Stalin could be explained away or dismissed as a peculiar part of the Russian autocratic experience and Communism could be turned into a tamer socialism, but the overriding belief of many in an egalitarian future, a displaced capitalism, and man as a highly evolved and cooperative animal remained an intractable vision.

Obviously, in retrospect, Chambers overlooked the reserves of liberty and spontaneity that were still present in liberal democracies. There was also a failure on his part to fully grasp the superiority of markets compared to central planning. Chambers seems to have overlooked the steadfastness of many Americans who lived our nation's peculiar liberty deep in their bones. Their inchoate, if not faded, connection to our Founding and its promises remained the undying American fire throughout much of the Cold War. Losing to Communism was a reality most Americans were determined to avoid.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

THREE POSSIBILITIES FOR THE WEST

Chambers outlined in *Cold Friday*, a posthumously published text that is in many respects darker than *Witness*, three possibilities for the West. One option was defeat. The second option, and the one more likely in Chambers' mind, was a tragic political victory whereby the West became brother enemy. The West would lose its soul and assume much of Communism's philosophical imprint in the victory. The last option—the least likely, Chambers thought—was victory through recovery of the religious and moral excellence of the West.²⁶

Under the second, hollow-victory scenario, Chambers reasoned that as the West pushed against Communism, it would assume a politically atheist form. This godless imprint would be necessary for survival, or so the strategists and intellectual clerisy of the West would tell its denizens. Thus, the singular elements of Western life—culture, religion, and political liberty—would be flattened by the synthesis of the two conflicting systems. Stripped of a claim to the good, the West would resolve the total crisis by assuming significant features of Communist ideology: a directed economy, highly centralized and overbearing political authority, sparse personal liberty, and law as an ideological weapon.²⁷ The logic of peace for a people unable to believe its former truths exacted a high price.

Unqualified victory, or Chambers' third option, was heavily qualified by the facts necessary for its realization. In this scenario, the West recovered itself through suffering and thereby found vindication against its foe. Inherent in Chambers' personal ascent from revolutionary ideology had been the price he paid to reach higher ground. In so doing, he had come to understand the truth about himself and the malformities of the West. The West, too, if it chose to resist Communism rather than attempt *détente* or a nego-

²⁶ Whittaker Chambers, *Cold Friday* (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 70–73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

tiated surrender, could find similar light and understand the existential terms of its struggle.

Of course, the full play of “incalculable suffering” that Chambers believed was necessary to the vanquishing of Communism never emerged in the Cold War.²⁸ Chambers’ reference to suffering as a prerequisite for victory, however, pointed beyond physical combat to the West’s extirpation of the worldview it had assumed. For the West to emerge victorious, it would have to see clearly its own faults, recover its distinctive religious and philosophical truths, and fight valiantly to defend them.

In this light, Chambers’ counsel may connect at one level with the actual unfolding of the long war with the Soviet Union, for some in the West did not hesitate to proclaim in full Communism’s innate immorality. Indeed, the witnesses of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, and scores of patriots in the East shook the very ground of the totalitarian machine.

Revealing the difficulties of the third option, as Chambers perceived them, was the learning he obtained from Father Alan, a Passionist monk. Hospitalized in November 1952 after a heart attack, Cham-

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bers developed a friendship with Father Alan, the hospital’s chaplain. Bed-ridden and worn down from writing *Witness*, Chambers asked Father Alan whether his statement on the West’s doom had been too foreboding. The monk’s response was quite revealing: “Who says that the West deserves to be saved?”²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11; Richard M. Reinsch II, *Whittaker Chambers: The Spirit of a Counterrevolutionary* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2010), pp. 65–68.

“As I stepped down into the dark hall, I found myself stopped...by a hush of my whole being.... [A] voice said with perfect distinctness: ‘If you will fight for freedom, all will be well with you.’”

Implicit in this response is the notion that nothing was guaranteed to the West if it persisted in jettisoning its foundational truths. To deserve to be saved would entail fidelity and responsibility to the ideas and habits of being that had lifted the West into the civilization of liberty and mercy it had formerly been. At this point, Father Alan suggested, the West’s distinctiveness was almost lost.

The West’s humanism, its commitment to the dignity of the person, formerly grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation, had been relocated in the autonomy of will. Unlike any other teaching on man’s connection with God, it was the Incarnation that thundered the beauty of the world and of being. What did exist, even in its fallen condition, was good, and the Creator had attempted to redeem it through His own sacrifice. Man was not alone, nor was he ever bereft of dignity. Chambers powerfully sensed this truth in his embrace of Christianity:

[T]he question of the impossible return struck me with a sudden sharpness. I thought: “You cannot do it. No one can go back.” As I stepped down into the dark hall, I found myself stopped... by a hush of my whole being.... [A] voice said with perfect distinctness: “If you will fight for freedom, all will be well with you.”³⁰

The radical Enlightenment had attempted to secularize the Christian virtues. Man’s happiness, thinly conceived, would be the supreme point of his existence as he shed the dogmatic quest for religious truth.

³⁰ Chambers, *Witness*, p. 84.

Chambers sensed that the quest for abundant bread and undetermined liberty not only had failed to deliver the goods, but also had led to distorted persons. The joyless quest for joy was no elixir to the being who existed between God and the Devil. Denying or obscuring man's nature and desire to know the truth about himself in light of his mortality was its own tyranny. This problem foreshadowed Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's piercing observation on the modern understanding of flourishing: "If humanism were right in declaring that man is born to be happy, he would not be born to die."³¹

THE COMMON IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNISM AND LIBERALISM

Chambers' pessimism was rooted in his belief that the West had adopted a materialism comparable in many respects to the intrinsic workings of Communist ideology and was unable to engage in the deep metaphysical and religious reflection that it needed to renew itself.³² Chambers searched in *Cold Friday* for the current sources of communion for the West. The West was strangely paralyzed, Chambers believed, and unable to hope or move forward as a civilization confident in its own spiritual and philosophical foundations. Its communion and the objects of its loves no longer inspired.

A civilization that began in wonder at the whole, its communion emerging from the rapprochement of philosophical inquiry and divine revelation, had self-consciously chosen to limit itself to the truth claims of modern science. Modern man's fascination with the monkeylike inventiveness of his own brain implied, Chambers said, "the first sentence of the physics primer: 'All of the progress of mankind to date results from the making of careful measurements.' But Communism, for the first time in history, has made this vision

³¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "The Harvard Address," in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947–2005*, ed. Edward E. Ericson, Jr., and Daniel J. Mahoney (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2006), p. 574.

³² Chambers, *Cold Friday*, pp. 69–70.

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the faith of a great modern political movement."³³ The Western heritage of mercy and love—the foundation of its communion—born from the belief of man under God was displaced by a new order of knowledge that insisted, "If man's mind is the decisive force in the world, what need is there for God?"³⁴ Practically speaking, the advance of science and the ever-increasing productivity of the machine held the devotion of civilization.

Chambers, of course, contended that man, in his essence, needed and demanded more than these could offer. They were parts of his experience but could never be understood in isolation from the wondering whole of man and the strange love that opened itself to him in revelation.

Chambers saw man as a complex arrangement of misery and greatness. Modern liberalism refused man this tension and urged upon him the technique of evolving perfection. The universalist claims of reason, self-sovereignty, liberty divorced from law and truth, and reduction of man's loves to consensually generated norms proclaimed a pathway to an ever-improving future. He quoted theologian Reinhold Niebuhr to sum up the anthropology of modern liberalism:

[S]upposing himself more and more to be the measure of all things, [he] achieved a singularly easy conscience and an almost hermetically smug optimism. The idea that man is sinful and needs redemption was subtly changed into

³³ Chambers, *Witness*, p. 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the idea that man is by nature good and hence capable of indefinite perfectability... Man is essentially good, says 20th Century Liberalism, because he is rational and his rationality is (if he happens to be a liberal Protestant) divine, or (if he happens to be religiously unattached) at least benign.³⁵

Believing himself beyond original sin, convinced by his own illusions of his project's immanent goodness, modern man rushed headlong toward his doom. He became blind to the evils in front of him. For Chambers, modern liberalism was disastrous because it tended toward an atheistic and ultimately misguided humanism.

Chambers argued that ideology is at bottom an artifice of mind that attempts to construct upon reality an encompassing system that removes man from his inherent limitedness. Ideological man is a denatured man who assumes God-like status, projecting truth on empty matter, demanding its transformation. Thus, ideology compels obedience from all competing explanations and understandings of the human predicament. Here Chambers correctly observed that ideology is the effectual truth of the West's desiccated humanism. His judgment was certain: There were no Promethean shortcuts.

But if the culmination of the West's flattened humanism was ideology, what were the prospects for its ascendant progressive politics? Chambers saw the political vision of American progressives as resting ultimately on faith in many of the ideals held by socialists. As he noted in *Witness*:

[W]hen I took up my little sling and aimed at Communism, I also hit something else. What I hit was the forces of that great socialist revolution, which, in the name of liberalism, spasmod-

ically, incompletely, somewhat formlessly, but always in the same direction, has been inching its ice cap over the nation for two decades.³⁶

He further elaborated, "It was the forces of that revolution that I struck at the point of its struggle for power. And with that we come to the heart of the Hiss case and all its strange manifestations."³⁷

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Chambers' observation does not equate the New Deal with Communist subversion, but he does argue that its political ideas emanate from the same unbounded confidence in state power. To the question of why state power should not be applied to numerous social, economic, and political ills, New Deal acolytes had no principled reason for saying to the state: this far and no farther. Chambers declared this insight in uncompromising terms:

For as between revolutionists who only half know what they are doing and revolutionists who know exactly what they are doing the latter are in a superb maneuvering position. At the basic point of the revolution—the shift of power from business to government—the two kinds of revolutionists were at one; and they shared many other views and hopes. Thus men who sincerely abhorred the word Communism, in the pursuit of common ends found that they were unable to distinguish Communists from themselves, except that it was just the Communists who were likely to be most forthright and most dedicated in the common cause.... For men who could not see that what they firmly

³⁵ Whittaker Chambers, "Faith for a Lenten Age," in *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers 1931–1959*, pp. 184–193, 185.

³⁶ Chambers, *Witness*, p. 741.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 742.

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.³⁸

While not intending to derail the purity of modern American liberalism, Chambers' indictment of Alger Hiss served notice to America that pride, venality, and deceit lurked within a political program that believed itself beyond the compromises and temptations of power and politics. Further, these perennial problems of power were magnified by the sheer scope of what New Deal progressives wanted to accomplish with the state. Fidelity to the ideals of progressivism was said to be enough. It was this innocence of progressives' self-understanding that Chambers shattered, and it was also why he had to be resisted, if not destroyed.

This confidence in state power to shape and determine man is one part of the hyper-rationalist mind with which Chambers was at war in his witness and writings. This is the vital philosophical connection between modern liberalism and Communism for Chambers.

In correspondence with Buckley, Chambers wrote: "It is a Western body of belief that now threatens the West from Russia. As a body of Western beliefs, secular and rationalistic, the intelligentsia of the West share it, and are therefore always committed to a secret emotional complicity with Communism."³⁹ The lodestar was the science of political and economic progress divorced from the considerations of man as a particular creature with concrete loves and loyal-

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 472–473.

³⁹ Chambers, *Cold Friday*, pp. 225. "If they could have Communism without the brutalities of ruling that the Russian experience bred, they have only marginal objections. Why should they object? What else is socialism but Communism with the claws retracted?" (p. 226).

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ties. As Diana Trilling stated in her memorable essay "A Memorandum on the Hiss Case":

I think we can also say that in our century the source of all political idealism has been socialism, and, since the Russian Revolution, specifically the socialism of the Soviet Union. I do not mean that whoever has worked for political progress has necessarily been a socialist. I mean only that it has been from socialist theory that political progress has chiefly taken its inspiration, and from the socialist example its practice.⁴⁰

For Chambers and other conservatives of his era, the lines of philosophical and political engagement were never so clearly stated.

THE CONSERVATIVE SPIRIT

Chambers' conservatism emerged fully after the Hiss case. It is worth noting that he shared few of the certainties that American conservatives typically hold. Chambers never looked to markets or small government as self-executing entities existing apart from the travails of democratic man.

Evident in Chambers' initial reluctance to join *National Review* was his belief that the publication was in pursuit of a conservatism that could not prevail in a mass democracy. He thought that early conservative and libertarian lions like Frank Meyer, Frank

⁴⁰ Diana Trilling, "A Memorandum on the Hiss Case," *Partisan Review*, May–June 1950, reprinted in *Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism of the American Soul*, ed. Patrick Swan (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2004), pp. 27–48.

Chodorov, and Russell Kirk were too abstracted from political realities. Their Platonic conservatism wanted to roll back the state, undo the New Deal, and return to another era—in the case of Russell Kirk, perhaps to another country and century. Chambers' conservatism, on the other hand, was better attuned to the realities of a post-New Deal America. He exhorted conservatives to come to terms with realities that diverged in many respects from their laissez-faire preferences of the 19th century.

For Chambers, politics was an attempt to think coherently about the goods put in common and how they should be defended or augmented. This might sound innocuous, but Chambers was stating to American conservatives that the ideals, habits, and institutions of the late modern era foreclosed the possibilities available just decades ago. The new reality that confronted conservatives, along with ideology, was democracy and its ever-widening equality of conditions. After all, as Chambers remarked to William F. Buckley, "the Enlightenment and its fruits were a wrong turning in man's history. But it was a turning, and, within its terms, we must maneuver at the point where to maneuver is to live."⁴¹

Wealth creation, the promise of equality under law, and the absence of formal hierarchy portended new

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opportunities for human excellence but also sadness and potential disorder. Prosperity came to be seen by many Americans as a default condition rather than as a tremendous achievement built on deep conservative foundations. Its absence became a source of scandal that demanded political remediation. Equality under

⁴¹ Chambers, *Cold Friday*, p. 227.

law was the American achievement *par excellence*, but contained within it were the seeds of its own destruction, for the possibility, if not actuality, of democracy's outstripping government institutions and flattening social authority always loomed within modern representative government. Chambers' conservatism proceeded from this vital concern and sought to preserve and extend the achievements of American civilization.

Chambers believed that "[t]he conservative position defends and invokes those great truths which the mind of the West has once for all disclosed."⁴² But what does this mean exactly? If, as Chambers observed, "each age finds its own language for an eternal meaning,"⁴³ then conservatism by definition has no formulaic task. From an awareness of the good emerges coherent thought about the means of politics toward affirming the rightful ends of political association. Government could bring men security, allowing them to work for greater levels of prosperity, comfort, and development, but the element that man demands the most, if his nature is to be fully respected, is liberty of thought and action in his pursuits.

This was, however, the element of humane government under siege by modern liberalism and its claim that liberty was not man's by right but given to him by the state. On his own, in the unregulated marketplace and civil society, man was a hobbled creature. Under the promises of the social democratic state, man's *being* opened in ways more conducive to peace. Those long oppressed by unjust practices found vindication at the hands of the state. Americans' anti-social instincts—jealousy over property, family, and the willingness to fight over parochial truths that progressives thought were *passé*—were expunged. Replacing them was the federal management of particular interests from Washington, D.C., by an alphabet soup of government agencies.

⁴² Whittaker Chambers, *Odyssey of a Friend: Letters to William F. Buckley, Jr., 1954–1961*, ed. William F. Buckley, Jr. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), p. 185.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

Further complicating matters for conservatives was the razor-wire act thrust upon them by history:

Those who remain in the world, if they will not surrender on its terms, must maneuver within its terms. That is what conservatives must decide: how much to give in order to survive at all; how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles. And, of course, that results in a dance along a precipice. Many will drop over, and, always, the cliff-dancers will hear the screaming curses of those who fall, or be numbed by the sullen silence of those, nobler souls perhaps, who will not join the dance.⁴⁴

Chambers' concerns evoke the fundamental tensions introduced by modernity and capitalism's "breathless acceleration" and the fallout introduced by the latter's "creative destruction." Capitalism, as Chambers noted, produced the Cadillac, but it also stirred up the passions where the "Cadillac dangles always just out of reach at the end of the stick."⁴⁵

Chambers' highly critical review of Ludwig von Mises' *The Anti-Capitalist Mentality* pointed to the dramatic shortcoming of a civilization animated by materialism and its inability to generate the moral capital that served as the precondition to limited government and free markets. Mises' arguments amounted to know-nothing conservatism, Chambers argued, because he ignored the deeper moral quality that hid behind envy and sought firmer ground within the unsettling tendencies of modernity.

Conservatism's task, Chambers thought, was to speak to this anxiety of democratic man and lift his desires and thoughts to more elevated ground. Again, Chambers' pessimism rushed in.

In what might be termed the "socialist agriculture" essays, Chambers noted the conflicting sentiments

of hate and need felt by his fellow Maryland farmers toward federal and state agricultural policies.⁴⁶ On the one hand, farms were no longer profitable, and the farmers relied on government checks to stay afloat. On the other hand, these same farmers deeply resented state socialism in the agricultural sector.

Chambers explained the futility of their anti-government resistance by citing Lenin: "He who says A must say B." The farmers had lost the authority to resist state intervention. It was here, at the intersection of frustration, made possible by the proficiency of capitalism and the low arts of democracy, that Chambers pointed to as an invariable trap for conservatives. Creative destruction—in this case the need for fewer farms because of increased agricultural productivity—surely led to a definable economic progress, but its costs were real.

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Chambers' observations can be dismissed as reactionary or as ignorant of the magic of markets, but he touches the nerve of democratic capitalism in these essays in a disturbing way. The most conservative and inherently stabilizing element of any regime might be the family farmer or those who hold property in a significant and tangible form. Those who have held the land for generations and raised children from its produce and income were seen by Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other Founders as the seedbed of freedom. Chambers had uncovered their seeming corruption and, one can add, the corruption that infiltrates from state interventionism, as true in farming as it is in any industrial pursuit.

⁴⁴ Chambers, *Cold Friday*, p. 235.

⁴⁵ Chambers, *Odyssey of a Friend*, p. 142.

⁴⁶ Chambers, *Cold Friday*, pp. 232–236; "A Westminster Letter: From Springhead to Springhead," in *Ghosts on the Roof*, pp. 319–235.

Surely, the task for thoughtful conservatives must be to take heed of such observations and incorporate them within a comprehensive understanding of a free government and economy, for an intractable feature of capitalism and democracy is that one must account for the loser. Chambers found one particular loser—the farmer—and lamented both his loss and his attempt at recovery through state provision. About the possible alternatives for conservatism on this front Chambers was less than sanguine.

CHAMBERS' TEACHABLE PESSIMISM

Chambers' famous conversion from Communism to Christianity and his witness to truth in the early Cold War period were made possible because he wrestled with the question that modern rationalism was unable to pose to itself: *What can be hoped for with this life?* In the opportunity for transcendence, a need felt by every man, exists the possibility for man to finally understand himself. Ideology had inverted this process by divinizing the self and placing upon it the fundamental charge to redeem the world. Man was, in effect, God. However, terrestrial salvation was not achieved. Man succeeded in the 20th century only in organizing the world against man.

Chambers' abiding witness exists in the failure of modern ideology to achieve its objectives. From a man who drank deeply from its promises and directly experienced its lies about the human person emerged the wisdom that speaks to the dignity of man.

This is the source, I think, of Chambers' ongoing relevance to our situation. The West still accepts, more or less, the fundamental conceit that man makes his own reality. Communism stands discredited. However, our philosophical confusion, from which the ideology emerged, remains too much with us.

Second, our conception of liberty firmly resists the notion that it be based on the biblical understanding

of man or, similarly, an understanding that liberty be oriented to truth, which can be known through both faith and reason in their various capacities. Unfortunately, liberty is now synonymous with the consuming desires of man's will. We have become unable to think about the good and the purposes it discloses for our choices. The denizen of late modernity remains unable to think about the good that *we* must achieve as human beings living in defined political orders through the application of reason and will.

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I would contend, with Chambers, that we are now on the backside of the failure of Enlightenment rationalism to achieve its objectives. We still search endlessly for a way to define ourselves through ideology and politics. Our moment, however, is that of a patient who is unable to understand his perilous condition but knows that he cannot go on in his present state much longer.

Perhaps we should not be so willing to dismiss Chambers' pessimism. The basic problems he identified telegraph much of our philosophical and political impotence. His witness still haunts our hollow condition. We forget Whittaker Chambers at our own peril.

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