

/Baton Rouge LA/70809 --

Brian Lamb

C-Span

I caught, last Saturday night, just a few minutes of the re-run of your session with the three talk show hosts -- a bit too late to phone in for the Friday program. The part I caught was when you held up the *USA Today* headline on the Alger Hiss case.

I'd have thought Jerry Williams had been around long enough to know that, though Nixon was a model for many professional Communist-hunting politicians of the day, Nixon actually modeled his House and Senate campaigns after the job George Smathers had done on Claude Pepper in their Senate race. *IN FLORIDA.*

As for Hiss's innocence or guilt, you may recall that Harry Truman labeled the charges against Hiss as "a red herring."

Yet, I can still remember that when I read Chambers' book in late '53 or early '54, when I was at Harvard on a Nieman Fellowship, I was much impressed by Chambers' account of their relationship. I recall it so precisely because every mention of the case by Harvard faculty (at least when I was around) indicated that no one of them believed Hiss could possibly be guilty.

You may recall that the Massachusetts (or was it New York?) bar later restored his right to practice. I thought at the time I'd like to check further -- a "one of these days" intention that got lost.

I had a private session with Truman in '56 when he was in D.C., on a trip campaigning for Stevenson. Before coming to Washington he'd been in Milwaukee or Minneapolis -- I've forgotten which -- and at the airport as he was leaving a radio reporter had asked him if he still felt that Alger Hiss was innocent and whether, if he had it to do over, would he still have ordered the drop of the A-bomb in Japan.

I'd gotten a rush call from the *Chicago Daily News*, then one of our papers, to try to get to Truman for further comment. I did get to Truman, but got little more out of him than the radio reporter had -- yes, he'd drop the bomb again, to save the lives of American

servicemen, and (as best I recall) *"I've seen nothing yet to convince me that Alger Hiss was a spy..."*

I can't remember, off the top of my head, the name of the guy who did hours of tapes with Truman -- in the early '70s, as I recall. I remember that he went over the A-bomb stuff pretty thoroughly, but I don't recall whether he got additional comment on the Hiss case.

**Merle Miller*

If you want to explore that issue any further:

+ The closest guy to Nixon in the Hiss case days was Bill Rogers -- is he still alive? -- who was on the staff of the House committee before being named as Herb Brownell's assistant at Justice, and there might be some FBI info reachable through FOI request. **Hater Nixon's Secy of State*

One crazy thing about that period was the FBI's pre-Hiss ignorance of the U.S. Communist movement. A couple of years earlier, and before the Francis Walter /Un-American Activities idiocy, a one-time avowed Communist female (was her name Elizabeth Bentley?) had gone to the FBI to "explain all," and they sent her away, convinced she was a nut.

+ I noticed that you had Bob Donovan on your author's segment some weeks ago. He might remember some of the Hiss-period stuff, and Scotty Reston surely would.

+ McGeorge Bundy, Harvard's token Republican historian during the Hiss period, and Arthur Schlesinger would have some insight.

"Why do New Yorkers feel so passionately about these things?"

In part, I think, because it was in places like New York and Chicago that Depression-driven people had taken at least a passing look at Communism. Most of the literati had been to meetings or knew people who had -- and they were offended by the gross attacks of people like Nixon and Francis Walter and Joe McCarthy.

The Chicago people I knew tended to laugh it off, while the New Yorkers were prepared to fight, could not forgive such action as "politics as usual," wanted revenge.

I can't recall the name, but there was guy who was a PR-man of sorts for the CIO's Phil Murray who was being called to testify before the Un-American Activities Committee and he phoned his old friend, Ed Lahey, saying something like: *"I need to talk with somebody."*

They met at that little park near DuPont Circle. The guy was scheduled to testify next day, hadn't yet decided if he was willing to "name names." As Ed later told me: *"I couldn't really advise him, but I could tell, as we talked, that he was going to do it..."*

The interesting thing -- to Ed -- was, as he put it: *"I hoped to get the answer to something I've wondered about for years."* Turns out Lahey was in Murray's suite in a San Francisco hotel at the time the United Nations was being created. Murray's PR guy got a phone call, from either New York or Washington, and something he was told produced a laugh. *"When he hung up the phone," Lahey said, "I asked him what was so funny -- and all he said was: 'There's a House Committee that's red-baiting Alger Hiss' -- and he immediately left the room..."*

Ed said that as the rendezvous in the park was ending, he reminded the PR guy of that incident, asked what it meant -- and, of course, the guy didn't recall the incident.

So much for history -- keep up the good work!

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