

Jacoby, Susan. *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 256pp.

Nicholas Witham\*  
University of Nottingham

Setting out her stall early in *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*, Susan Jacoby makes it clear that she believes Hiss – one of the most iconic victims of the early Cold War’s anti-communist crusade – to have been guilty both of perjury and spying (20). However, proving this point is not the author’s central concern. Instead, she engages with the ideological, rather than factual, battles that have been fought in the period since Hiss was convicted in 1950. Jacoby suggests that the iconography of the case has been defined by a number of “cycles of memory and forgetting,” and that the views held on the topic by politicians and intellectuals can be read as “symbolic indicators” of wider attitudinal shifts towards American liberalism and its relation to the New Deal, the Cold War and, ultimately, 9/11 (29). *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*, then, stands as a welcome attempt to engage with a broad sweep of twentieth-century American intellectual history in an iconoclastic yet accessible manner.

The book is arranged chronologically, with individual chapters covering the reception of the Hiss case in the periods 1948-1950, 1950-1965, 1970-1980, 1980-1992 and 1992-2008. These attempts at periodisation sometimes prove confusing (for example, the attitudes towards Hiss held by the New Left, a movement traditionally thought of as existing during “the sixties,” are dealt with in the chapter on the Nixon-Ford era), but they allow Jacoby to persuasively argue that whilst the case was by no means *the* defining issue in postwar intellectual life, it can very effectively be used to measure the vicissitudes of the period’s political thought and culture.

One of Jacoby’s key interests is to argue that the Hiss controversy was as much about the New Deal as it was about Cold War espionage. She suggests that the Manichean logic of American anti-communism as it manifested itself in the hysteria surrounding the case was forged on the Right with the major goal of “undermining the legacy of the New Deal” (165). In this view, Hiss stood not only as the physical embodiment of an existential communist threat, but also as the signifier of an urbane, elite liberalism that prioritised Keynesian economics and the

---

\* Nicholas Witham is currently completing his PhD at the University of Nottingham. He can be contacted at [aaxnw1@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:aaxnw1@nottingham.ac.uk).

expansion of social welfare. According to Jacoby, this was as true in subsequent periods as it was at the time of the trial. She suggests, for example, that the young neoconservatives who held important appointments in the Reagan administration “believed in old Cold War verities and took Hiss’s guilt for granted.” This led to heated political debates over the role of government during which the Right often looked back to the case in order to define the “liberal intelligentsia” as “something vaguely un-American and alien” (168-171). Overall, then, Jacoby convincingly argues that the Hiss case was an important component of the conflict in American political culture over the efficacy of New Deal liberalism.

She is also able to demonstrate that even after the demise of the Soviet Union, and the development of the so-called “war on terror,” the controversy still holds intense resonance. “The identity of the enemy has changed,” Jacoby argues, “but the issues raised by the Hiss case about dissent, loyalty and patriotism have not” (201). Indeed, if she is to be believed, its spectre hangs over debates about the explicitness of the threats posed to American national security by ill-defined fundamentalist “Others,” and the manner in which the body politic should react to them. In such an argument:

the real significance of [Hiss’s] fate 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 danger, to preserve national security without violating individual rights and constitutional traditions (221).

In making this case, Jacoby highlights the intensely polemical thrust of her book, the political coordinates of which are not difficult to discern. She complains that “aggrieved accusations of stupidity and downright malevolence” from both Left and Right have repeatedly surfaced in political disagreements over the Hiss controversy, thereby bulldozing the possibility of intelligent debate on key issues (215). This leads her to admit a fondness for “the anti-Stalinist liberals of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s generation” (218). Indeed, the links between Jacoby’s approach to the current political climate and Schlesinger’s Cold War liberalism run deeper than the superficial aesthetic parallels connecting *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*’s front cover and that of *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Houghton Mifflin, 1949). In arguing during the height of the Hiss controversy that a responsible American liberalism should stand as a defence of democracy “against both right and left” (ix), Schlesinger’s book foreshadowed Jacoby’s centrist approach to the post-9/11 conjuncture by exactly sixty years. In the realm of the public intellectual, then, we are reminded that no matter how much things change, they always seem to remain the same.

Overall, Susan Jacoby should be applauded for her attempt to make twentieth-century American intellectual history accessible to a wide audience. But in using her book to think about the future of left-liberal politics in America, we should perhaps bear in mind C. Wright Mills's 1960 critique of the ideas of Schlesinger, Daniel Bell and other Cold War liberals. In his now famous "Letter to the New Left" (*New Left Review*, September-October 1960) Mills described the consciously managerial approach taken by such intellectuals as a defence of an inequitable status quo that compromised any attempts at "radical criticism" (19). As we move steadily into the first term of the Obama presidency, should we be satisfied with the vacuous offerings of a liberal politics that defines its foreign enemies in the "totalitarian" terms of a previous era? Or, should we aim at the root of the problem by arguing for a forthright engagement with the economic structures that bring about social injustice on a global scale? These are tricky questions, no doubt, but ones that *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History* fails to face up to.