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QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE MEDAL FOR WHITTAKER CHAMBERS

The orchestrated antagonism of the media against President Ronald Reagan for awarding the Medal of Freedom posthumously to Whittaker Chambers is a fascinating example of a Pavlovian-style conditioned response. PBS's American Playhouse will air a four-hour anti-Chambers docu-drama on May 7 through 9.

Why are the liberals beating the drums of rage because President Reagan honored a man whom time has proved truthful against all odds?

Today's bitterness on this subject cannot be merely a reprise of the passions of the 1940s when the conviction of Alger Hiss motivated the liberals to a frenzy of hatred against Chambers. Even if those 35-year-old memories are still vivid for some, today's anti-Chambers journalists are too young to remember.

Furthermore, the gargantuan effort by the liberal media to exonerate Hiss was finally shot down in 1978 with the publication of the book "Perjury" by Allen Weinstein. This liberal historian started out believing Hiss had been unjustly convicted, but five years of exhaustive research convinced him that Hiss indeed was guilty.

The Medal of Freedom enables Whittaker Chambers to witness to us from another generation that Soviet spies could and did exist in our government. In the decade following World War II, many top Soviet agents were exposed and their stranger-than-fiction adventures made a matter of public record by official investigating bodies.

In the 1940s, the Communist espionage apparatus successfully infiltrated the highest echelons of the U.S. Government. Communist agents included the number-two man in the State Department, Alger Hiss; the number-two man in the Treasury Department, Harry Dexter White; a top White House assistant, Lauchlin Currie; a high official in the Commerce Department, William Remington; a key agent handling codes in the Government Printing Office, Edward Rothschild; the Secretary of the International Monetary Fund, Frank Coe; and several U.S. officials employed by the United Nations.

The theft of the atom bomb, called "the crime of the century," involved Dr. Klaus

Fuchs and Dr. Bruno Pontecorvo in England and Dr. Allan Nunn May in Canada. No fictional spy thriller can match the innovative ways that Soviet spies made contact with their accomplices in the United States.

Klaus Fuchs, who knew all U.S. atomic secrets, passed them to Harry Gold. The two men, who did not know each other and did not use their real names, made contact one January afternoon in New York City solely because one man carried a tennis ball and the other carried a pair of gloves and a green book.

Harry Gold traveled to Albuquerque, rang the doorbell of a stranger, presented half of the panel from a Jello box, found that it matched perfectly with the other half held by David Greenglass, and received from him drawings and a written description of the A-bomb trigger mechanism.

The stars of the Soviet espionage network during the 1950s were the handsome Englishmen, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean. Other important Soviet spies during the late 1950s included Bernon Mitchell and William Martin, cipher experts in the National Security Agency, who stole U.S. codes and secret messages and then fled to Moscow via Havana.

A senior officer in Soviet military intelligence who defected to the West and gave us much valuable information, Colonel Oleg Penkovskiy, graphically described the omnipresence of the Soviet network: "We spy everywhere. Espionage is conducted by the Soviet government on such a gigantic scale that an outsider has difficulty in fully comprehending it. To be naive and to underestimate it is a grave mistake."

Is the liberals' antagonism against giving the Medal of Freedom to Chambers because they are afraid that this Presidential tribute will cause a new generation to ask a crucial question? Since the Soviets so successfully penetrated the highest levels of our Government in the 1940s and 1950s, is it rational to assume they have terminated their espionage in America?

But how can we know the answer to current questions about espionage, since our country's internal security system has been dismantled? We have no House Committee on Un-American Activities, no Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security, and no Subversive Activities Control Board. The Whittaker Chambers' Medal reminds us that we need them.