Whittaker Chambers was born in 1901 to a middle-class family and grew up primarily in New York. After graduating from high school in 1919, Chambers worked various odd jobs before finally deciding to attend Williams College. He was only there a very short time before transferring to Columbia University. Chambers thrived in the intellectual atmosphere of Columbia, where he began to write extensively.

While attending Columbia, he also began to be more and more influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx. Chambers, as well as many intellectuals at the time, believed that Western civilization as it had existed was in the throes of death. The philosophy of Marxism held that there was an inevitable progress of history and that capitalism and the old regimes of the world would inevitably destroy themselves and be replaced by communism.

Chambers left Columbia after his junior year with the express purpose of joining the Communist Party. Chambers claimed he was drawn to communism by the “problem of war.” On a visit to Europe, he saw the chaos that had sprung up in the aftermath of the First World War. He believed that this chaos was the precursor to an eventual worldwide communist revolution. In 1925, he became clear in his convictions and decided that he needed not only to believe in them but to act.

Chambers joined the Communist Party and began to write for the Daily Worker, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party in the United States. He published many articles and short stories that promoted the communist worldview. Eventually, he was recruited into the ranks of the Communist
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Underground, a part of the party that actively participated in espionage against the United States for the Soviet Union.

As a member of the Underground, Chambers primarily worked as a courier. He would take files given to him from officials in the U.S. government and carry them to Soviet contacts, who would send them back to Moscow. He primarily worked between Washington D.C. and New York City. It was in this capacity that he became involved with Alger Hiss. The two worked close enough together to develop a mutual liking and friendship with one another, a bond that would be significantly tested in time.

After some time, however, Chambers’ belief in the communist message began to wane. His opinions began to change rapidly as he heard stories about the Great Purge committed by Stalin in the mid-1930s. This, as well as hearing reports of fellow associates being killed or made to “disappear” made him doubt the “ends justify the means” mentality that the Communist Party supported. Chambers knew it was time to leave.

In his book, Witness, Chambers says of his departure, “Two things made that break and that flight possible. One was the devotion of my wife—devotion of a kind that asks only danger, trial, and great hazard to prove its force. The other was a faith that, if I turned away from evil and sought good, I would not fail; but whether or not I failed, that was what I was meant to do, at all costs, without measuring of consequences.” Chambers recognized the dangers on hand but knew that to stay with the Communist Party could mean death for him and his family. He had to risk the break.

Chambers was able to leave the Communist Party in 1938, and for ten years his life was more or less tranquil. He began working at Time magazine as a writer and editor and excelled. Chambers tried to put his past behind him. Many of those he had worked with in the Communist Party were his friends, and he had no desire to see them in prison.

Troubled by the growing evil of the Stalinist Soviet Union, however, he felt he had to act. He contacted the federal government about his past associates a few times, but nothing came of it. That was until 1948 when he was called to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

While testifying before this committee, Chambers claimed that Alger Hiss was a communist who had actively participated in espionage against the United States. This was a bold claim, as Hiss was a high-ranking government official who was well respected within the administration of Harry Truman.

Hiss vehemently denied the accusations. He stated that he had never been a communist, nor had he ever participated in any espionage activities. He even went so far as to deny that he knew Whittaker Chambers. He and his defense team also attacked Chambers’ character. They brought up pieces that Chambers wrote in college to show that his views and trustworthiness were questionable. In order to prove his case, Chambers had to incriminate himself as a former communist. He gave the committee a set of papers and microfilm, including several hand-written notes from Hiss, that Chambers had stashed away while they worked together.
These documents blew the Hiss case apart. Not only did they implicate Hiss in espionage, but they proved that he had lied while under oath. Although the statute of limitations had passed for the espionage case, Hiss would be brought up on the charge of perjury and convicted.

Whittaker Chambers’ journey to the witness stand was one of high integrity. He saw the evils of the Communist Party, and despite having many friends in that organization, he knew he had to leave. It was these friends that he would, in the end, have to turn against in order to show the world of the dangers they posed. Whittaker Chambers gave up his own reputation and position for the sake of honesty.