

part 11/7/75

Hoover Used Press, Maligned Foes

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We have been digging into the secrets of the late J. Edgar Hoover, whose abuses of power made him the most formidable and feared bureaucrat in the history of the republic.

Only a complete exposure of his abuses can prevent them from happening again.

He built his enormous power by manipulating the press and maligning his critics. Thanks to carefully publicized human strengths and carefully hidden human failings, he appeared as a man of action fighting the forces of evil.

More than 40 years of planted press notices transformed his bulldog visage into a national symbol. His staccato speech and stern mannerism completed the image.

Writers who dared to criticize Hoover wound up on his hate list, which was far more deadly than the FBI's 10 most-wanted list.

Attorney Max Lowenthal, for example, questioned the FBI's fabled reputation in a book entitled simply "The FBI." It dealt more with the corrupt agency Hoover had inherited than the effective crime-fighting organization he built. But there were some passages that were less than flattering about Hoover.

After he read it, he let out a roar of rage and summoned a trusted assistant whose function it was to prevent such embarrassments. Hoover angrily threatened

to fire the man for failing to block publication of the book.

The agent would rather have faced gangland gunfire than Hoover's wrath. The tongue lashing was more than he could take; he broke down and wept like a baby. "Mr. Hoover, he sniffled, "if I had known this book was coming out, I'd have thrown my body into the presses to block it."

Although it was too late for this sacrifice, Hoover ordered his minions to prepare half-a-dozen black, fiber-bound volumes of critical analysis tearing apart the Lowenthal book. These were used to compose harsh book reviews, which were secretly circulated to compliant newspapers and magazines. Agents were even reduced to canvassing booksellers and urging them not to stock the book.

But this wasn't enough to placate the irascible FBI chief. He also ordered every index in the FBI checked for derogatory information about Lowenthal. He seized upon a vague tie with a Communist-front group, which was spread through FBI field offices to the media.

The Fund for the Republic, meanwhile, conducted a scholarly study of domestic communism, which concluded the FBI was overblowing its importance. This inflamed Hoover, who ordered an all-out investigation of both the Fund and its head, Robert Maynard Hutchins.

The FBI chief directed his subordinates to prepare a monograph ripping Hutchins to pieces. They became so impressed with Hutchins from their research, however, that they produced a mild monograph.

Down came instructions to rewrite the piece, making it suitably derogatory, or pain of being censured. The second, more vicious monograph was leaked to the press.

A recalcitrant former agent, Jack Levine, was railroaded out of the FBI by Hoover but struck back with an article ridiculing the FBI director. The vengeful Hoover blocked his admission to the Arizona bar.

Similar smear campaigns were run against former agents Bill Turner and Bernard Connors, who also wrote critical books about the FBI.

In contrast, Hoover directed a vigorous promotion campaign to see his own book on communism, "Masters of Deceit," which was written for him by FBI ghostwriters. The FBI chief arranged with a friend to set up a front group, which bought hundreds of copies of the book and distributed them to influential Americans. Glowing reviews, prepared inside the FBI, were distributed to the press.

Indeed, Hoover established a powerful publicity machine. For example, a letter writing unit, staffed with FBI agents, personalized his correspondence. The agents provided inquirers with information on what kind of suits, shoes and ties Hoover wore, how he liked his steak and his favorite recipe for popovers.

Because of his mastery of publicity, the old curmudgeon lasted on top of the bureaucracy longer than any other American and became too formidable a public figure for Presidents to challenge.