

# We Pry Harder

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*FBI.* By Sanford J. Ungar. Atlantic/Little, Brown. 682 pp. \$14.95

By ANTHONY MARRO

IT'S HARD not to feel a twinge of sympathy for Sanford Ungar. A year ago this book would have been a media event, spawning headlines about buggings, break-ins, harassment of civil-rights leaders, and a host of COINTELPRO activities that ranged from the semirational to the obscene. Ungar had it all—or at least sizeable chunks of it—but before he could get his book into print, the Church Committee and a handful of fellow reporters did him in. And in reading *FBI* now, after this past year of disclosure, one gets the uneasy feeling that we've heard it somewhere before; about all they left for Ungar to tell us was that J. Edgar Hoover slept in the nude.

No matter. *FBI* is a fine work, and a remarkably even-handed one. And if others already have given us a tour through this Byzantine world, none provided such detail, or such historical perspective, or explained so clearly how it all came about, and why we shouldn't have expected anything else.

Probably no official ever personified an agency more completely than did Hoover his bureau. Like its director, the FBI was rigid, disciplined, and untarnished by the baser forms of corruption (corruption of the spirit being a more debatable matter). Like its director, it also could be petty, vindictive and mean, and became, at least by the late 1960s, sadly out of touch with the times. Ungar traces the

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evolution of both the man and the bureau, showing how both developed a sort of hardening of the arteries as the years went by, forging them into such rigid stereotypes that they came perilously close to becoming caricatures of themselves.

Hoover's reputation already has been kicked around quite a bit since his death, with questions being raised not only about his tenure but about his personal life and his psyche. Only a few months ago *Time* magazine questioned whether he had been a homosexual (Edgar knew Clyde before Bonnie knew Clyde, and all that), and while it concluded that he probably was asexual rather than homosexual, it nonetheless suggested that he had been a very strange man. This was something that many of the people who had worked for him had known all along, and it caused one former agent to complain: "I don't care if he was *queer*—the problem is that he was *weird*."

Ungar's assessment is less simplistic but in some ways more harsh. In his view, Hoover was a lonely man, who was cold and self-indulgent, and who seldom did anything that was motivated purely by unselfish or humanitarian concerns. He was defensive and insecure about his own education, but never did anything to improve it; his letters often bordered on incoherence, and it was rumored that not only hadn't he authored the books published under his name, but that he hadn't even bothered to read them.

"Despite his extraordinary power and exposure," writes Ungar, "in the eyes of most of his associates Hoover seemed to remain a man of small dimensions who never became sophisticated or graceful. He was prejudiced and narrow-minded, overtly biased against black people . . . distrustful of other minority groups, and intolerant of women in any but subservient positions." He

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was also, Ungar continues, "embarrassingly susceptible to manipulation through flattery or fulsome praise and sometimes hopelessly out of touch with the realities of changing times."

More to the point, by Ungar's account he wasn't a particularly good administrator, squandering his bureau's energy and resources on petty regulations and trivial crimes, chasing leftist bogeymen and perceived threats (taking the

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New Left more seriously than anyone but the New Left itself, for example), while insisting right up to the time of the so-called "Apalachin Convention" that the Mafia simply didn't exist. One of the values of this book, in fact, is that while Frank Church and his committee focused mostly on the bad things Hoover and his bureau are supposed to have done, Ungar puts as much emphasis on the things they did badly. By the time

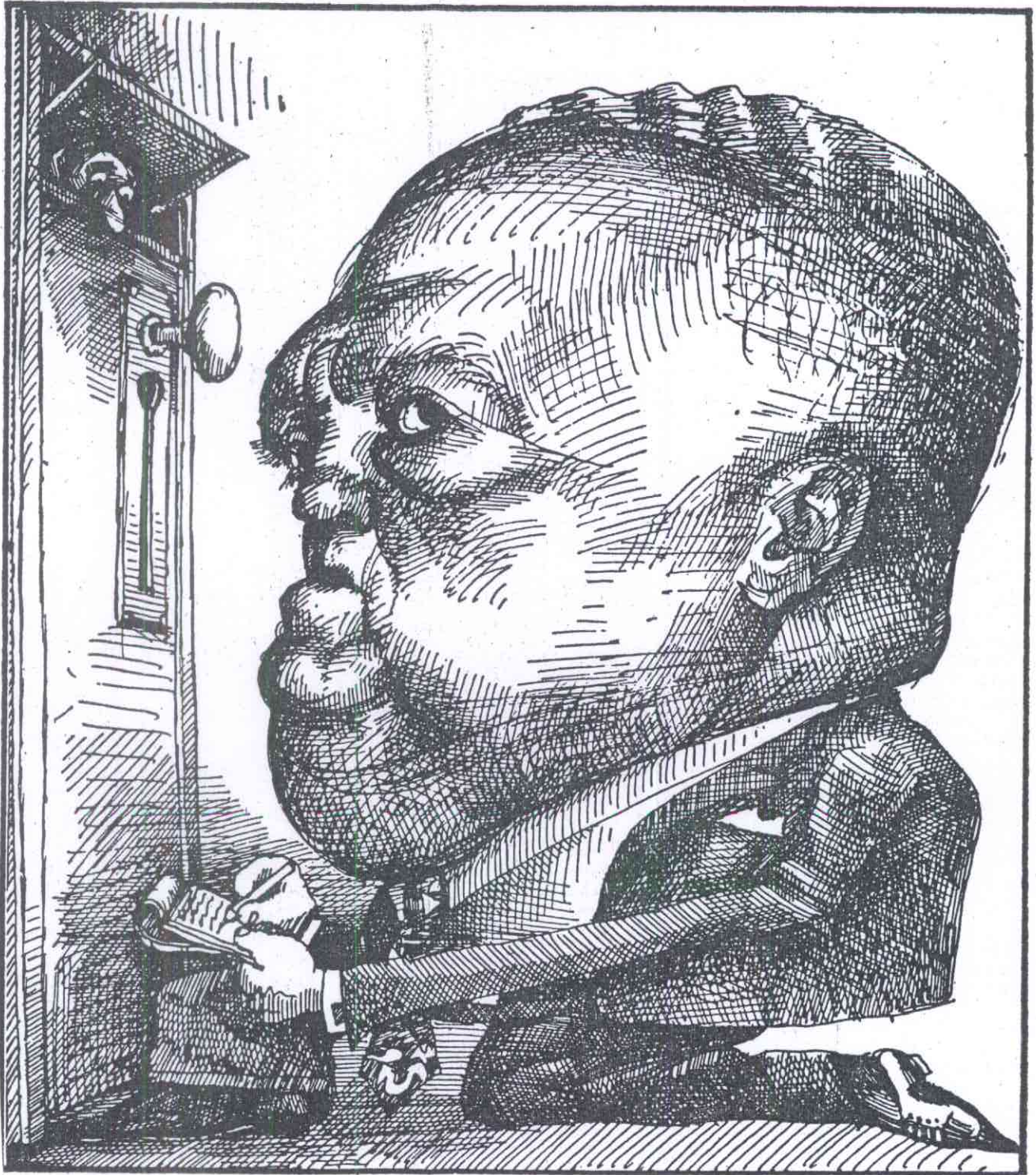
Hoover died, Ungar says, the FBI had been reduced to near-chaos: "under almost every rock was a problem."

One of the problems—and one that continues to this day—was that many of the men who came up through the ranks were men of limited vision and ability, men more adept at buttressing the director's prejudices than at formulating rational approaches to problems. They operated for years

in Hoover's shadow, but now Ungar has dragged them into the open and they're here for our inspection, not just the dedicated and rational ones who were loyal and patriotic in the best sense of the word, but also the sycophants, the courtiers and the occasional dingbats who worked their way towards the top of Hoover's fiefdom. It would be unfair to say there were more of the latter group than of the former, but there were enough to suggest that in Hoover's Bureau many of the people who rose to the top didn't have the qualifications needed to remain at the bottom. The most successful field agents, says Ungar, were "pragmatists and risktakers in the extreme." The men who tended to rise, on the other hand—many of them administrators who had begun their careers as clerks and had spent little time on the street—often were small-minded men who advanced not because they were aggressive or innovative, but because they had mastered a system so given to caution that a simple letter to a congressman might require the approval of 17 higher-ups before it could be sent. Inevitably, the hierarchy inherited by Clarence Kelley included many who were, in Ungar's view, long on fulsome praise of the director and short on ideas.

There are fascinating tidbits of information scattered throughout the book, some of them mere gossip but others footnotes to history. We learn, for example, that the FBI arrested the eight Nazi saboteurs who came ashore on Long Island only after one of them phoned the New York Field Office and turned himself in. We are told that one of Hoover's courtiers was suspected of double-billing on his expenses, that another was forced to resign after being fingered as the source of several embarrassing Watergate leaks, and that John Malone, the

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"We Pry Harder." by Edward Sorel

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longtime head of the New York Field Office—the bureau's largest—was often referred to by his agents as "Cementhead." (Note: Ungar doesn't mention it, but agents are fond of tagging such nicknames on their bosses. One official was known as "Hotel Johnnie," another "The Rodent," yet another was called "The Wedge" — i.e., the simplest tool known to man — and a whole group of men whose careers were believed to have been advanced with the help of Hoover's longtime secretary, Miss Helen Gandy, were known collectively as the "Gandy Dancers.")

But Ungar is at his best in pointing out the differences between the reality of the bureau's operations and the public image cultivated by Hoover—detailing, for example the shortcomings of a policy intended to produce impressive statistics (an emphasis on stolen cars and fugitives) rather than to come to grips with the more serious problems of organized and white-collar crime. And in examining the day-to-day operations as well as the excesses, he shows clearly that while scores of agents over the years were banished to Butte, Montana, or Oklahoma City for minor infractions or foul-ups that embarrassed the director, it was—in the long run—not the agents but the policymakers in Washington and the director himself who caused the bureau its deepest and most lasting embarrassments.

For all this, FBI is neither an anti-FBI book, nor even an anti-Hoover book. Ungar seems to have a high regard for the FBI and for many of its agents, and is as willing to praise its professionalism and lack of corruption as he is to criticize (at times, ridicule) its excesses. This results in a balance that is particularly refreshing given the fact that so much of the literature on the bureau consists of straight-out puffery or heavy-handed assaults.

"Born in an era of crime waves and Red scares, it had grown in size, stature and influence during a major showdown with totalitarianism and then flourished further under more crime waves and Red scares," he writes. "It had a peculiar legacy from a single powerful man—a mixture of honesty and efficiency, pettiness and foolishness, and a penchant for arousing fear and loathing. The FBI stirred strong feelings in one direction or another on the part of most Americans: its agents were disdained as thugs or worshiped as heroes, miscast and exaggerated to be either Gestapo-style storm troopers or all-powerful supermen. Most people, defenders and critics alike, were confident that the bureau was capable and equipped to do virtually anything."

The result, inevitably, was that when Hoover died and the Watergate climate forced open FBI files and permitted everyone to see just what it had been up to, there was disappointment all around. Up close, it seemed much more human, Ungar writes, but at bottom it simply was "neither as good nor as bad as anyone had feared or expected."

There are a number of flaws in this book, albeit most of them minor. One is that Ungar's prose style is such that it's sometimes difficult to tell where he has stopped quoting FBI memos and has resumed his narrative. Another is that while he notes it, he never really captures the intense dis-

like—almost contempt—that many field agents have for their administrative superiors in Washington, especially those who are seen as small-town Southerners with no appreciation of the complexities of urban crime. As a bitter, long-time agent once put it: "They recruit them out of the swamps, bring them into the bureau as clerks, get them an accounting degree from some eighth-rate school, and fifteen years later they're part of that little clique that's running the bureau."

There also is a heavy emphasis on documents that suggests that Ungar's research was more extensive and productive than his reporting, and he clearly had less success in penetrating the world of the field agents than he did in capturing the atmosphere of Hoover's immediate court. But none of these are major, let alone fatal, flaws.

Back in June, 1974, Clarence Kelley paid a visit to Senator James Eastland, who presented him with a bound volume in memory of Hoover, containing "Memorial Tributes in the Congress of the United States and Various Articles and Editorials Relating to his Life and Work." Kelley, trying to make small talk, turned to Eastland and said: "Senator, there's an awful lot about J. Edgar Hoover in this book." To which Eastland replied: "Chief Kelley, there's an awful lot about J. Edgar Hoover that ain't in this book."

There's a lot about Hoover that isn't in Ungar's book either, but he's gone a long way towards filling the gaps. It's a splendid book, and a timely one, and if its impact has been blunted somewhat by the disclosures of the past year, it nonetheless should have a lasting impact. Should we ever need reminding that officials must be made accountable for their uses of power, the reminder is here in this story of the bureau, and of the man who cleaned up federal law enforcement but then stayed on too long.