

Garry Wills

The dangerous Dorothy Day

J. Edgar Hoover got few things right in his life; but he was right about Dorothy Day. He thought her extremely dangerous — and she is. In 1941, Hoover put her on his list of people to "consider for custodial detention in the event of a national emergency."

That was the period when Hoover was heartened by the existence of concentration camps for Japanese-Americans (Nisei) citizens. He dreamed of extending the concept to include other Americans he feared — Mr. Hoover was obviously a man easily frightened.

Hoover's detention lists — of those to be rounded up in case of a communist threat — were kept up, under various names and evasive maneuvers, until 1975.

Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, was clearly a threat to Hoover's dream of rounding up all those people he feared and putting them, without due process, in detention centers. Few let their consciences be troubled by what he did to the Nisei. But Dorothy Day's conscience never sleeps. One of the things that went into her huge FBI file was a visit to the Japanese concentration camps where "I saw a bit of Germany on the West

Coast." An agent wrote in horror that the *Catholic Worker* newspaper dared to claim "The Japanese are treated terribly."

Beginning in 1939, Hoover's thugs spied on all the Catholic Worker Movement's food kitchens and farms, looking for a communist under the beds. The record, released by the Freedom of Information Act, runs to 575 pages of sick comedy. As usual, the FBI is not only vicious but inept. For years, Dorothy Day was listed in the FBI files as a Russian immigrant. Agents had clearly confused her with Catherine de Hueck Doherty, another Catholic woman who fed the poor in New York.

Agents searched *Catholic Worker* premises for subversive material, and found only lives of the saints. They were thorough in their research, though. Somebody looked up the dates of St. Francis of Assisi's life and identified the other hagiographical subjects, in case one of the saints should turn out to be a Russian. That is how our secret police spent our tax money, paying men to rummage through the Catholic Encyclopedia.

Despite the lack of evidence, Wendell Berge, an assistant attorney general,

wrote that the *Catholic Worker* "is in fact a front publication of the Communist Party." A more cautious agent, on equally non-existent grounds, decided that the Day woman "is either consciously or unconsciously being used by Communist groups."

Let us be fair. There is something un-American about feeding the poor, isn't there? Remember that this destroys their moral fiber. And Farmers do use sickles, don't they? That makes them walking symbols of communism. It is hard to do justice to the lunacy of the FBI. The bureau found it suspicious that an agricultural symbol printed in the paper combined a sickle with a Christian cross. It is a wonder no one noticed St. Joseph the Carpenter was portrayed with a hammer.

But, as I say, J. Edgar was right to fear Dorothy. Her eyes were always open. She saw through his phony patriotism to the man's basic panic, his great fear of the United States Constitution and his long secret war on it. If there had been a few more Dorothys, we would not have put up with that petty despot for half a century, fully one quarter of the nation's life. She is dangerous to tyrants — which is why we need her so.