

# FBI's Internet site offers public a peek into agency's files

By Angie Cannon

INQUIRER WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — Deep inside the forbidding FBI fortress is a small room with fluorescent lights and rows of tall bookshelves. There is a table, a few chairs, and some nondescript landscapes on the walls.

This is where juicy FBI secrets are stashed.

In the FBI Reading Room, you can learn that Lucille Ball registered to vote as a Communist in 1936 at her grandfather's insistence.

You can read about an FBI investigation of John Lennon when agents learned the musician had given \$75,000 to a group planning to disrupt the Republican National Convention in 1972.

You can peruse files about enduring mysteries: aviator Amelia Earhart's disappearance, UFOs (one of the most requested) and John Wilkes Booth (was he alive for years after Abraham Lincoln's assassination?).

It is all there — worn and wrinkled letters, clippings, telegrams and memos stored in 13 nine-foot bookshelves.

And now, you do not have to travel to Washington to read the files. The FBI is putting the files on the Internet — 20 files (including Errol Flynn, Adolf Hitler and Marilyn Monroe) went online a few days ago, more than doubling the number of files on the agency's World Wide Web site, [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov). The FBI aims to put its entire Reading Room collection — 1.3 million pages — on the site.

"We believe making this information available on our Web site helps maintain the public's confidence that the FBI is investigating consis-

tent with the rule of law," said JOHN Collingwood, an assistant FBI director. "We think the best way for the public to be confident in how the FBI conducts itself is to see the underlying documents."

The Internet may make the Reading Room go the way of "Old Beulah," the Packard sedan that FBI agents drove to crime scenes in the 1930s. Even now, weeks go by when no one shows up at the Reading

Room. Sometimes, only five to 10 people come in.

The Reading Room is open five days a week, but visits are by appointment only and require two-day notice. Most requests for files are made from afar, through the Freedom of Information Act.

The FBI office that handles FOIA requests has between 400 and 600 employees. The bureau gets 12,000 to 13,000 written requests annually for files — many of which are not among the 278 files in the Reading Room.

Linda Kloss, a public information officer for FOIA requests, says it takes at least one to four years to fulfill a request. People can pay for copies of files, which then are mailed.

There is one catch — for the FBI to make a file public, the subject must be deceased, unless a person wants his or her own file.

Already, 20 requests have been made for any files about Frank

Sinatra and Barry Goldwater, FBI officials said.

The most common Reading Room patrons are college students, authors, academics and lawyers.

Jim Lesar, a Washington lawyer,

was there the other day with a college-age research assistant, combing files for a book he is considering. He was mum about the specifics but said his topic "deals with an aspect of J. Edgar Hoover's life."

"There's lots of good stuff in the FBI files," said Lesar, head of the Assassination Archives and Research Center, which focuses on John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Lesar said he had spent his legal career devoted to Freedom of Information Act litigation.

"I sue the FBI on a very regular basis," he said, noting that he intervenes on behalf of clients, such as best-selling author Anthony Summers, who wrote a biography of longtime FBI director Hoover called *Official and Confidential*.

Historian David J. Garrow said that just because someone had an FBI file, it did not mean the bureau was snooping.

"The FBI wasn't investigating 75

percent of the people who have files," said Garrow, who has requested many files during his years of research on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "The FBI was a vacuum cleaner of clipping operations. And people who think a 200-page FBI file is a big deal don't realize that people who the bureau was seriously following have thousands and thousands of pages."

Putting the files on the Internet is a dramatic departure for the FBI, he said.

"This is absolutely wonderful," said Garrow, who has written numerous books about Dr. King and the civil-rights movement, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Bearing the Cross*.

"I'm stunned that they would be technologically with it enough," he said. "And what amazes me is that they would be motivated to do this. The whole inescapable bureau problem is that the more they release, the worse their history looks."

Indeed, some files are a showcase of guns-blazing G-man triumphs. Others, however, portray an agency that engaged in petty snooping or was comically out of its time.

Hoover, for instance, was advised not to meet Elvis Presley in 1970 because the rock-and-roll icon was "wearing his hair down to his shoulders and indulges in the wear-



**J. Edgar Hoover**, the longtime FBI director. The files offer a window into the bureau of the past and the man who once led it.

ing of all sorts of exotic dress.”

The Nixon White House, in anticipation of a reception, asked Hoover to pore over FBI records for derogatory information about various athletes and sports journalists.

“A lot of the old files contain information that was collected in a different era, when standards were different and the law was different,” Collingwood said. “The FBI collected substantial amounts of information that we would never collect today. It was not unlawful at the time. But in hindsight, it was clearly not justified. Today’s laws and guidelines and internal policies preclude us from collecting that type of information.”