

J. Edgar Hoover, by Curt Gentry; review by Athan Theoharis 11/8/91

Today's Washington Post review illustrates the unwisdom of assigning the author of a competitive book to review a newer one on the same subject.

From my dealings with both men I have reason not to accept either as fully informative or fair, Gentry because he lied in the book he ghosted for Francis Gary Powers and his U-2 flight shot down over the USSR and Theoharis because he has consistently sought to make it appear that his is the only basic and dependable work, all-inclusives when it is not, very good as it is, and because he has pretended that my work at least, is his. (I gave him hundreds of pages of FBI reports he credited to the FBI, not me, and he was so stingy that he did not even send me a copy of his book.)

Theoharis begins his review with two paragraphs <sup>partly of material</sup> largely ~~rising~~ <sup>these</sup> in part of two paragraphs and in its concluding sentence and he devotes the rest of the half-page review, beginning in the second paragraph, <sup>to</sup> telling the readers why <sup>they should</sup> not get or even trust it.

He criticizes Gentry for accepting "misinformation" from "his FBI sources," <sup>including former officials,</sup> (who may well have been Gentry's source for saying that Hoover had certain FBI records Theoharis says do not exist. In this Theoharis covers himself with a single word, "extant," referring to Hoover's two special series of office files. Official and Personal and Confidential. He does not address whether the files he says do not exist could have been among the many destroyed by Hoover's private secretary, Helen Gandy.

<sup>one of</sup> In fact, where he is supposedly talking about these "extant" two files, specifically "celebrity files," Theoharis states explicitly "there are no such files." He is careful not to say in these "extant" remains. In fact there are many such files that the FBI has, some of which I've obtained by virtue of duplicate filing, mine being the duplicate copies.

One of his perhaps accurate criticisms of Gentry relates to a list of records to be destroyed on <sup>Hoover's</sup> his death. Theoharis says there was no need for any such list because Gandy destroyed those records. What she destroyed is copies that were in Hoover's personal files. Why if there were no other copies, which I'm inclined to believe was not true, would Theoharis' criticism be valid. and all the many pages I have from these two Hoover <sup>office</sup> personal files are in fact duplicates. Destroying them while leaving the originals or other duplicates in file would <sup>defeat</sup> ~~prevent~~ <sup>Gandy's</sup> the purpose of destruction.

Theoharis' own scholarship is subject to question. He filed FOIA requests and he accepted what he got in response without taking any one case to court when it is impossible that he got full compliance with his requests. Thus he wrote not only based on known incompleteness, one of his criticisms of Gentry, he also did the FBI a favor by making it possible for it to claim properly that all it had to disclose in response to duplicating requests is what it opted to let Theoharis have.

The review also serves to advertise Theoharis' competitive books.

# The Man Who Knew Too Much

*w/wh Post 11/3/91*  
**J. EDGAR HOOVER**  
**The Man and the Secrets**  
By Curt Gentry  
Norton, 846 pp. \$29.95

By Athan G. Theoharis

**T**HE LIFE of J. Edgar Hoover, who for 48 years served as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, inevitably commands interest—a man who turned the FBI into a powerful, virtually autonomous agency and transformed his relationship with presidents and attorneys general from trusted subordinate to coequal (even Harry Truman, who risked political suicide when firing General Douglas MacArthur, quickly rebuffed suggestions that he fire Hoover, despite his own doubts about Hoover's methods and loyalty). Curt Gentry's massive biography is but the latest attempt to understand "the man and the secrets."

Gentry's book is a comprehensive and well-written survey of Hoover's tenure as director of the bureau, and provides insights into how Hoover turned a relatively inconsequential office into an agency that influenced American politics from the 1930s. It is a fascinating story about how Hoover amassed, used and abused power. Nonetheless it is a flawed book. There are a number of errors that stem from Gentry's failure to research sensitive FBI records and he often uncritically accepts misinformation offered by (anonymous) former FBI agents and officials.

Gentry claims, for example, to have researched Hoover's extant Official and Confidential File, as well as that of former FBI Assistant Director Louis Nichols. He describes their contents thus: Nichols's file includes "personal information, sometimes derogatory" on members of Congress ranging from "such factual documentation as an arrest record or an endorsed check to unsubstantiated rumors or anonymous letters" (this file contains no such information). Hoover's Official and Confidential File includes: "blackmail material" on Joseph Kennedy, John and Robert Kennedy and their wives (the only blackmail material is on John Kennedy, there is none on Joseph or Robert Kennedy or John's and Robert's wives); the "forbidden fruits of hundreds of illegal wiretaps and bugs," including "evidence" that Attorney General Tom Clark had "received payments from the Chicago syndicate" (in fact the file contains records of only six taps and two bugs and no information pertaining to Clark); and "celebrity files, with all the unsavory gossip Hoover could amass on some of the biggest names in show business" (there are no such files).

Gentry's other references to Hoover's office file when reporting specific matters in his book are either totally or partially wrong. Two representative allegations: that Hoover maintained a dossier on Senate critic Kenneth McKellar (in fact the folder in question reports on a meeting with House Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Thomas McMillan); and that he "neutralized" his congressional rival Martin Dies upon learning that Dies had received a bribe (the folder identifies the recipient of this bribe as Congressman Samuel Dickstein).

Not having researched sensitive FBI files, Gentry often falls victim to misinformation offered by his FBI sources. For one, Gentry recounts how Hoover, upon learning that certain federal employees were homosexual, pressured them to inform on their agency's activities. In fact, Hoover authorized in June 1951 a formal Sex Deviates program under which information was first disseminated to specified officials in the executive, legislative and judicial branches (and in time to officials of universities and police agencies) to purge identified homosexuals. Second, Gentry describes how Hoover

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Hoover demonstrating submachine gun to baseball manager Mickey Cochrane in 1935

and favored FBI officials frequently viewed pornographic movies (a favorite was a film of a "well-known female singer") in a private "blue room" in the Crime Records Division. But he is apparently unaware that in 1925 Hoover authorized the creation of an Obscene File to maintain "obscene or indecent" material. This special file contained, by the 1960s, a permanent collection of more than 10,000 "stag films," photographs, comic strips, playing cards, books and pamphlets. The collection, whether or not Hoover had a personal interest in pornography, was separately maintained to ensure careful preparation, and favorable publicity, of obscenity cases and as well to limit agents' access to this "filth." The file had other uses, as in the 1951 case when officials of the CIA's psychological warfare division were allowed to review its contents.

Third, Gentry writes that in 1951 five FBI agents spent several weeks in the National Archives scissoring, renumbering and retyping former Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau's diaries, thereby creating "a history of the New Deal as approved by J. Edgar Hoover." In fact, Morgenthau's diaries were deposited at the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park and FBI officials did not excise so much as receive in 1955 excerpts from the diaries (secretly provided by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee in concert with Eisenhower administration officials to document the Roosevelt Administration's wartime "softness toward Communism").

And one last example: "over the years," Gentry asserts, Hoover compiled a "D" (destruct) list of "specified files, films, and recordings" that within "an hour" after Hoover's announced death were shredded at FBI headquarters and field offices. Beyond ordering his executive assistant, Helen Gandy, to destroy his so-called Personal and Confidential File, Hoover had no need to draft a "D" list. Under Hoover's 1940 order sensitive communications were prepared on special paper to ensure that they would not be indexed in the FBI's central records system. Maintained thereafter in office files, under Hoover's March 1953 order the contents of these office files were to be destroyed every six months. (Some office files, however, escaped destruction, including Hoover's Official and Confidential File, and at least parts of office files maintained by Clyde Tolson, Louis Nichols and D. Milton Ladd.) Dating from the 1940s, moreover, FBI officials obtained National Archives approval to destroy specified files maintained in the FBI's central records system.

If flawed, Gentry's biography is generally solid and extends our understanding of Hoover's unprecedented career and of the seamy side of recent American politics.