Hoover: Monument of Power for 48 Years

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For millions of Americans, John Edgar Hoover was the ultimate in law enforcement and the personification of rectitude in public life.

For other Americans, growing in volume if not in numbers, he was the embodiment of authoritarian government and a menace to individual liberties

There was no middle ground for Hoover's admirers and detracters except for their shared estimate of his power: he was a Washington monument to whom eight Presidents showed deference and 16 attorneys general, his nominal superiors in office, gave sovereign control over the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Flinty congressmen yielded to no one in their admiration for J. Edgar Hoover. Tight-fisted appropriations committees rarely denied a budget dollar. Critics could come and go but they seemed only to stir Hoover's defenders to stiffer resistance, adding still more to the power and appearance of power for a man who already was an American legend.

In 48 years as FBI director he achieved a popular image of crime fighter, scourge of the underworld and ace combatter of communism. Behind that image was a man of intense personal conviction and great energy, but even more importantly, a consummate bureaucrat with a sure political sense.

Only in his final years, when occasional outbursts caused alarm among his supporters as well as his opponents, was that political skill questioned. And even when his administrative performance was under scrutiny, critics were usually careful to credit Hoover with years of pioneering innovations in an organization he rescued from chaos five decades ago.

Just last week a House Appropriations subcommittee gave fresh evidence of Hoover's unblemished standing with Chairman John J. Rooney (D-N.Y.), overseer of the Justice Department's budget. The bureau had been under fire for allegedly planting informers who went beyond their monitoring roles to instigate criminal acts. On this topic Rooney's only question was, "You don't allow any 'gay' activists in the FBI, do you?" Hoover replied, "We don't allow any types of activists in the FBI, 'gay' or otherwise."

Television newscasters had suggested that Congress had been hoodwinked into rubber-stamping FBI budget requests for the $125 million new headquarters. Hoover said they ignored, "for their own ulterior purpose in denigrating the FBI," that the structure was needed for FBI functions now housed in nine buildings.

"Exactly," said Rooney. "Please continue, Mr. Director."

Rooney denied being "hoodwinked" by FBI statistics about stolen automobiles recovered. "You and I know we have kidded about these statistics for many years," the chairman quipped.

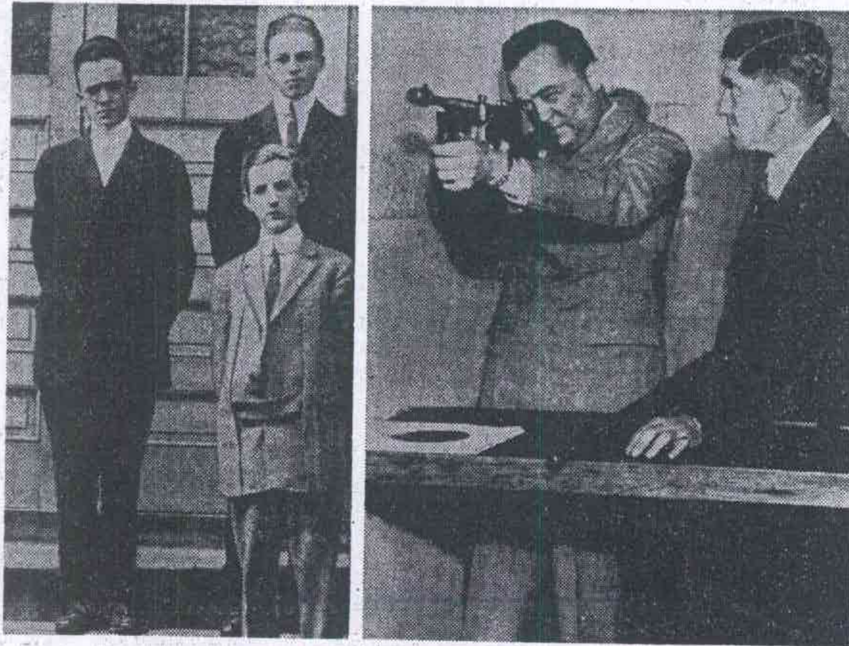
Referring to Hoover's ruddy complexion and apparently robust health, Rooney said that the director "seems to thrive, as far as his appearance is concerned here today, on the barbs of these left-wing foul balls who have been trying to lay a glove on him. I don't think anybody has succeeded up to now.

Hoover replied, "Mr. Chairman, I have a philosophy. You are honored by your friends and you are distinguished by your enemies. I have been very distinguished."

The budget under review was Hoover's final request. It called for $336 million to support 19,030 employees, including 8,526 agents in an expanding program that included responsibilities in keeping computerized criminal records for the nation's police forces. It was a long way from the pittances Congress had appropriated in the 1920s to a corrupt, politicized and demoralized investigative bureau.

The man who worked that change was a native Washingtonian whose 77 years only deepened his roots in the District of Columbia. He was born on New Year's Day, 1895, in Southeast Washington, the son of Dickerson Nayler Hoover, an employee of the Coast and Geodetic Service. His mother, the former Anna Marie Scheitlin, was his only companion throughout much of his life, for he was a lifelong bachelor.

Hoover's yearbook at Washington's old Central High School described him as "A gentleman of dauntless courage and stainless honor." His first job was as a cataloguer in the Library of Congress and his first career employment, after earning a law degree at night from George Washington University,



J. Edgar Hoover is pictured as a Central High student in 1913 in photo at left. J. Lyman Pratt stood at right next to Hoover and James A. Fowler Jr. was in front.

Hoover demonstrated use of a submachine gun to Detroit Tigers manager Mickey Cochrane in 1935. In third panel Hoover is shown with longtime FBI associate Clyde Tolson at the Joe Louis-Jack Sharkey heavyweight fight in 1936. Hoover posed with young Hollywood star Shirley Temple on a tour of the FBI building in 1936. A frequent

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witness before congressional committees, Hoover is pictured in fifth panel testifying in 1950 before the Joint Congressional Atomic Energy Committee about Klaus Fuchs.

was as a Justice Department clerk.

Deferred from the draft, Hoover began in 1917 at the age of 22 in the department's Enemy Alien Registration section compiling dossiers on suspected subversives.

His talent and enterprise made him a logical choice in 1924 to clean up the bureau of investigation, which then Attorney General (later Chief Justice) Harlan Fiske Stone described as "in extremely bad odor" from disclosures of corruption and incompetence.

Stone decreed that the bureau meet these standards, unknown in the turbulent post-World War I years: "That the organization itself should be law abiding; that all appointees should be men of intelligence and some education; that they should be subjected to a thorough course of training for their work."

"I am firmly convinced," said Stone, "that officials of the Department of Justice can more effectively perform their duties by acting the part of gentlemen than by resorting to tactics of a different character. The work of gathering evidence and of conducting litigation should be done in a gentlemanly way." under its early leadership the bureau harbored many agents who themselves had criminal records.

Stone considered Hoover's age, 29, an asset because, he said, "apparently he hasn't learned to be afraid of the politicians." He named Hoover, then a bureau assistant, as acting director on May 10, 1924.

Hoover aggressively carried out orders to professionalize his force. He simplified paperwork and his efficiency quickly began to produce increased money recoveries and other statistics that impressed Congress over the years.

By year's end Stone, his confidence more than vindicated, made Hoover's appointment permanent. Even after going on the bench, he continued to exert some influence to offset rumored plans to return the bureau to its old ways.

Years later, after the bureau had combined more gentlemanly techniques with widely publicized wars on crime lords, Stone voiced slight misgivings. He wrote:

"Personally, I have been sorry to see (the bureau) get the great publicity which it has received, and I only hope that the ultimate effect will not be to break down its morale. One of the great secrets of the success of Scotland Yard has been that its movements are never advertised. It moves and strikes in the dark. and in consequence is more efficient both in its internal organization and its relation to criminals than would otherwise be possible."

Nevertheless, the FBI's fame grew more from encounters with such gangsters as John Dillinger, Ma Barker, Alvin Karpis and George "Machine Gun" Pelly, and with that fame came criticism.

Sen. Kenneth D. McKellar (D-Tenn.) branded Hoover an armchair detective who had never made an arrest but left it to agents to risk their lives. Hoover finally responded by effecting the arrest of "Old Creepy" Karpis, who had been rated "Public Enemy Number One" for a murderous string of robberies.

The actual arrest was quiet and bloodless and had its humorous aspects. Hoover was on hand as Karpis emerged from a New Orleans hotel, but agents had to use their neckties to bind the prisoner because they had forgotten to bring handcuffs.

- Photo by Ed Streeky

Hoover is shown on his way to lunch in a recent candid photo.

Depression era hoodlumism gave way to World War II fears of internal subversion, and the G-men "gang busters" became the wartime spy-catchers. The agency's constantly increasing prestige and its growing storehouses of information ensured its role during the Cold War period as a foe of foreign and domestic espionage. Dramatic episodes, such as the surfacing of Herbert Philbrick from a Communist cell, enhanced the FBI's reputation and the credentials of Hoover as a spokesman on Americanism.

When issues of patriotism were not dominant, Hoover remained in the headlines for his commentary on crime in general. He assembled the only national crime statistics from state and local police reports and thus was positioned to give his views on a crime problem that he saw as ever-increasing.

Although his agents were under instructions to warn arrested suspects of their constitutional rights, Hoover became increasingly critical of the Supreme Court for gradually placing similar restrictions on urban police. He was only briefly silent on the subject after the high court, in its 1966 Miranda v. Arizona confessions decision, took pains to point out that the highly professional FBI was operating successfully without coercing suspects to confess.

Successive administrations gave Hoover wide leeway in running his bureau until the 1961 inauguration of President Kennedy. Although the President's first public act after his election was to announce the retention of Hoover and Central Intelligence Agency director Allen Dulles, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy offended Hoover on two counts.

Robert Kennedy demanded that the FBI take more vigorous action on civil rights and Hoover resisted, contending that his high-handed attorney general wanted FBI agents to become bus drivers in Southern demonstrations.

Hoover also initially resisted Kennedy's drive to battle organized crime. According to department officials, the director took the position that close contact with the underworld would corrupt his investigators as it had corrupted local police. In addition, he was skeptical about the claims of massive criminal syndicates.

A subsequent storm over wiretapping and who authorized it found Hoover under attack from Kennedy. But the director, ever the careful administrator, produced the paperwork that showed authorizations from his superiors.

Documentation did not still another eavesdropping controversy, however. Hoover, whose aides quietly circulated transcripts of a tape recording of conversations involving the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., said he eavesdropped on orders from Robert Kennedy, by then like King, a victim of assassination.

Former attorneys general Nicholas deB. Katzenbach and Ramsey Clark countered that Kennedy had authorized the electronic bugging only after repeated entreaties by Hoover, and then only to still the director's verbal attacks on the black civil rights leader.

Hoover's quarrels with Dr. King erupted in headlines from a November, 1964, interview with Washington newswomen. Responding to Dr. King's charges that the FBI lacked black agents and favored Southern-born agents in the South, Hoover said, "I can prove that he is the most notorious liar in the country."

He said he had no Negro agents in his Washington office but had 23 in the field and added, "I am not going to appoint any one in this office who doesn't meet the same requirements" as field agents.

Dramatic civil rights accomplishments occurred later, including the rapid solution to the murder of white civil rights volunteer Viola Liuzzo in 1965 through an FBI recruit who witnessed the slaying. As the years passed, the FBI's role in civil rights cases won considerable praise from the legal community and from such civil rights attorneys in the Kennedy administration as Burke Marshall and John Doar.

But Hoover found himself in more hot water, this time from Spanish-surnamed persons charging an ethnic slure, when he told an interviewer, "You never have to bother about a President being shot by Puerto Ricans or Mexicans. They don't shoot very straight. But if they come at you with a knife, beware."

The director publicly insisted that he had meant no ethnic aspersions and said the full context of the quotation would have made that clear. His agency sometimes strayed, however, from admonitions from the attorney general's office to avoid use of "Mafia" or "Cosa Nostra," terms offensive to some Americans of Italians descent.

Deemed indispensable by presidents, Hoover was retained by executive order each year after he reached the federal employee retirement age of 70. President Johnson, a friend and neighbor of Hoover's from his early days as a Texas congressman, granted the first extension and made clear that Hoover could stay on as long as he wished.

It was Hoover who informed Robert Kennedy of his brother's assassination. Hoover promptly moved a Johnson fa-

vorite, Cartha DeLoach, to the post of liaison with the White House. The famous Johnson telephone calls usually included at least one daily conversation with Hoover.

Although Hoover could have avoided criticism by doing nothing, he responded with sympathy when veteran Johnson aide Walter Jenkins was hospitalized following publicity over morals charges, sending flowers to Jenkins.

Hoover's solid relationship with President Johnson was once explained in typical LBJ language. "I'd rather have him inside the tent p . . . . . . out

than have him ouside the tent p . . . . . . in," he explained to friends.

Attorneys general who understood Hoover's strength at the White House were accordingly slow to pull rank on the director.

Chilly relationships with Democratic attorneys general were replaced by warmer contacts with Attorney General John N. Mitchell and his deputy, Richard G. Kleindienst. Mitchell had signalled a "tougher" stand on crime and President Nixon, a friend of Hoover since his early days in Congress, had campaigned with a pledge, "We're going to have a new attorney general."

Nevertheless there were rumblings in high department ranks. Talent hunters complained that the bureau, long proud that it reported facts and not conclusions, gave a plethora of detail on candidates for executive posts in a form that was hard to interpret Some Hoover allies on crime issues said privately they looked forward to the dedication of Hoover's new building so he could be ushered out in style and replaced by a younger man.

Bureau veterans aspiring to succeed Hoover were continually frustrated by lack of room at the top. Some left for high-paying employment elsewhere, something Hoover had often rejected in his prime years. Year in and year out his sidekick was Assistant Director Clyde Tolson, who also won executive reprieves from mandatory retirement to stay on the job.

The bureau suffered embarrassment in 1970 when a newsman was the first to report a 1948 racist speech in the background of Supreme Court nominee G. Harrold Carswell. Part of the blame was laid to the administration's desire for secrecy in its background investigation, a penchant the FBI tried to overcome by discreetly investigating later high court prospects ahead of any signal.

Further embarrassment came from the still-unsolved wholesale theft of documents from the FBI office at Media, Pa., last year. Hoover, infuriated, closed down several smaller offices where security could not be guaranteed.

The so-called "Media papers" were cited by critics as showing the extent of dossier-collecting on private citizens that seemed to bear little relationship to fighting crime or foreign enemies.

FBI boosters, some of whom began a national campaign to counter criticism of the bureau, complained of conflicting standards. They recalled that the Warren Commission had pointed to inadequate intelligence gathering in the protection of presidents, while later-day critics were condemning them for going too far.

The pro-FBI campaign was a reaction to a recent rash of critiques of Hoover and his agency. Some have argued that despite earlier leadership, the FBI has lost its role as pace-setter in anticrime techniques.

Feeding the controversy over Hoover were two major events. One was a 1970 interview with a Washington Post reporter in which Hoover, responding to statements in a book by Ramsey Clark, called the former attorney general a "jellyfish."

The other episode was Hoover's celebrated testimony before a Senate appropriations subcommittee in which he spoke of a radical plot to kidnap White House security adviser Henry Kissinger and blow up government heating ducts.

This testimony brought charges that Hoover was defaming those who dissented from administration war policies and, when eight persons were indicted and tried for conspiracy in Harrisburg, Pa., that the prosecution was devised to save face for Hoover.

When not personally embroiled in such battles, Hoover spent his last years in relative calm. He lived alone in his house in the Chevy Chase section of Washington but frequently escaped to the enjoyment of a good horse race or the Florida sunshine.

He basked in praise from well-wishers all over the country and savored his periodic trips to Capitol Hill to present his budget. Even the Supreme Court brought more satisfaction following the swearing-in of Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, who invited Hoover to the ceremony.

"Basically I think there is a general improvement in the country as a whole," Hoover told Congressman Rooney's subcommittee two months ago. "I think our present Supreme Court shows some indication of a change in its philosophy. I am glad to see it."

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J. Edgar Hoover is shown at left in 1924 when he became chief of the FBI and at right in 1954 when he posed with a boxer at a Washington dog show.