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The Reign of the Late J. Edgar Hoover

by Jack Anderson



J. Edgar Hoover, a trusted father figure to most Americans for his long FBI career, had become a controversial figure who was accused of arbitrary and despotic rule.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

For nearly five decades, the late J. Edgar Hoover cast a giant shadow over Washington. Few dared stand up to him in life. Fewer dissented from the public praise at his funeral. Yet in the backrooms of Washington, there was almost an audible sigh of relief at his passing.

One Senator, after issuing a stirring tribute to the memory of the great man, expressed the prevailing silent mood. "There must never," he whispered urgently to me, "become another J. Edgar Hoover."

As a critic of Hoover, I sometimes felt like a David hurling pebbles at America's most enduring symbol of strength and integrity. Americans put their trust in him as children might a father. I agree that his virtues overshadowed his failings. But there are some cautions to be learned from his remarkable reign over the FBI.

Dazzling image

Hoover projected a public image that dazzled Americans for half a century. First, there was the indefatigable bureaucrat who, at the age of 29, single-handedly transformed what was known in Washington as the Department of Easy Virtue into an elite corps of professional lawmen.

Then came the legendary crimebuster of the 1930's whose agents solved kidnappings, chased hoodlums and gunned down mobsters. And finally there arose the supersleuth who broke up Nazi spy rings during World War II and rooted out Communist sympathizers after the war ended.

He was America's No. 1 lawman—a tough, incorruptible cop who made all of America his beat. But behind the image, there was the man: the old bulldog, the irascible and durable despot who wielded bureaucratic power throughout Washington and stubbornly refused to let go after he had passed the retirement age.

Suggested reforms

When he died, he left a gaping hole in the FBI fabric that perhaps never will be sewn back together. But there are thoughtful men inside the FBI who agree that the old Hoover pattern shouldn't be restored. They would like to see a new, reformed, more effective FBI rise from Hoover's bier.

Here are several modest reforms that I would recommend:

(1) When Hoover took over the old Bureau of Investigation in 1924, he demanded a free hand to hire and fire. He set his own rigid standards for his agents. Hacks, misfits, drunks and court hangers-on were quickly replaced by men with law and accounting degrees.

Result: the FBI achieved a distinguished record free of scandal.

But Hoover maintained discipline with petty rules, arbitrary punishments, meaningless chores and constant harassment. He became obsessed with appearances. Agents were reprimanded for long sideburns, dirty fingernails, even sallow complexions.

One prospective agent, a war hero who had been wounded in action and had yellowed slightly from intensive



Young director: In 1935, Hoover with a machine gun at the FBI's target range.

medication, told me bitterly he had been dismissed because Hoover didn't like his looks. Another was banned to an unpleasant post after Hoover saw a newspaper photograph of him hustling a hijacker off an airline. The agent's sideburns, unhappily, were a fraction of an inch longer than Hoover approved.

Recommendation: The time has come to put the FBI under Civil Service. At least, FBI employees should be given job rights.

(2) To Hoover's credit, he never stepped into the dangerous arena of megalomania where sick men duel to rule the world. Several times in the 1940's, he was offered even more powerful positions in government. At one point, he was asked to coordinate Army and Navy espionage as well as the FBI's counter-spying. Hoover wisely turned down the job. "This country," he said, "doesn't need a Himmler."

Yet Hoover became entrenched as

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J. EDGAR HOOVER CONTINUED

lord of his own fiefdom, too powerful to remove and too jealous of his power to step down. If his stewardship taught us anything, it is that we can no longer afford a father protector.

Recommendation: No future FBI chief should be allowed to serve longer than two seven-year terms. Whatever the term, it should be fixed; retirement should be mandatory.

(3) Hoover was a public relations genius. He made himself a living legend by projecting the image of the fearless crusader against evildoers. It was an image built largely on press notices, movie scripts, a bulldog profile and public hokum. The watchword at the FBI was: "Do nothing to embarrass the director."

Big on statistics

He embellished the FBI's reputation for solving crimes by directing his agents to amass statistics. Instead of the long hours it takes to nail a Mafia leader, most agents spent their time chasing the easier-to-catch auto thieves, bank robbers and petty criminals.

FBI publicists furnished newsmen with favorable facts that made the FBI look good. As long as I was willing to praise Hoover, I could obtain sensitive information from FBI files. This would usually be slipped to me by one of Hoover's trusted aides, neatly typed, on plain white paper. For authors who would write heroic books about the FBI, Hoover's men would supply the research.

FBI writers also ground out articles and books under Hoover's byline. Although these were written at government expense, he distributed the proceeds. He pocketed one-fifth of the book royalties for himself and bequeathed the rest upon others.

Picked TV star

Hoover personally approved TV and radio scripts. He had such control of the media that he even handpicked Efreim Zimbalist Jr. to star in the FBI TV series.

Recommendation: Future FBI directors should be prohibited from using FBI material for commercial ventures, such as books and films, both during and after their term of office.

(4) Originally, Hoover sought to make the FBI free of political abuse. But as he became more ideological, he imposed his ideology upon the FBI. His passion against Communism led him, in the end, to view liberals, too, with increasing suspicion.

Attitudes toward political dissidence have changed considerably in the last 50 years. Most Americans, I think, are more tolerant today. But under Hoover, the FBI viewed black leaders as "rabble-rousers" and anti-war agitators as



JANE FONDA

In FBI files: Hoover collected information, unverified and trivial, on many prominent people who had not and were not likely to commit crimes. Agents snooped into their sex lives, businesses, at considerable cost to taxpayers.



JOE NAMATH



MARLON BRANDO



MRS. CORETTA KING



LANCE RENTZEL

"Marxists."

A secret file was kept at the FBI on every black leader of any importance. Even President Nixon's black disciple, Floyd McKissick, is the subject of a thick FBI file loaded with unfavorable references. And the FBI spent more time checking into the anti-war activities of

actress Jane Fonda than was devoted to any Mafia leader. G-men faithfully attended all Miss Fonda's performances and submitted dark, critical reviews for Hoover's benefit.

To the end, Hoover never failed to warn the American public of the Red menace. Even as President Nixon pre-



Hoover with Clyde Tolson, his associate director and friend. Hoover kept Tolson on as an adviser even after age forced the assistant into retirement.

pared to make his trip to Peking, Hoover wrote in an article entitled "Mao's Red Shadow":

"The shadow of Mao Tse-tung can be seen and felt in the United States today. We can expect the subversive danger to grow as time passes. The only way to meet it is to be prepared."

Avoid politics

Recommendation: The FBI must purge itself of Hoover's political ideology and practice what Hoover originally preached—political neutrality. It should be an agency respected as much by liberals as by conservatives, a community of impartial investigators whose own politics are left outside the agency.

(5) FBI files are stuffed with trivial, useless, irrelevant and often unverified material. Hoover also kept dossiers on people who had not and were unlikely to commit crimes—political figures, movie stars, football players, newspapermen, and other prominent Americans, personalities such as Rock Hudson, Joe Namath, Harry Belafonte, Coretta King, James Baldwin, Paul Newman, Marlon Brando, Jane Fonda, and Lance Rentzel.

FBI agents snooped into their sex lives, business dealings, and personal affairs. Hoover, the bachelor, demonstrated an inordinate interest, for example, in who was sleeping with whom in Washington and elsewhere.

Countless agents were used to gather the information at considerable cost to the taxpayers while at the same time Hoover fiercely resisted a White House suggestion that he spare a few hundred agents to crack down on drug abuses.

Affairs recorded

File after file at the FBI begins with the notation: "This individual is not the subject of an FBI investigation." The taxpayers might justifiably inquire: "Why is a file kept on these individuals?" Certainly, the FBI has no business poking into the bedrooms and private affairs of prominent Americans.

Recommendation: Controls must be established for the use of FBI files and dossiers. Firm limits should be set on where individual privacy rights begin and the government's right of inquiry ends.

There can be no denying the giant accomplishments of J. Edgar Hoover. He was one of the greatest public servants in American history. Probably no one ever served his country longer and with a more fierce dedication. But the Senator, whose public mourning was tempered by quiet relief, was also right. The fabulous FBI that J. Edgar Hoover left this country should become more an agency which serves the people who pay for it than a forum for the man who runs it!