

James J. Kilpatrick

Post 3/23/92

Monster Man of the FBI

The man was a monster. He was also, in his twisted way, a genius. He professed to loathe communism, yet he practiced the worst aspects of communism every day. During his lifetime he built a reputation as a 100 percent American. Twenty years after his death, we are beginning to see J. Edgar Hoover for what he was: the ultimate un-American.

In her new study of the FBI under Hoover, "Alien Ink: The FBI's War on Freedom of Expression" (Morrow), Natalie Robins performs a notable public service. At great expense, and at prodigious investment of time, she used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain FBI files on 150 persons. Her review of those files provides the most fascinating reading of the spring.

Fascinating, yes, and terrifying also. George Orwell's fictional world of "1984" was not more ominous than the world of J. Edgar Hoover. His genius was in meticulous organization of random bits of intelligence. The man was a vacuum cleaner. His agents sucked up every morsel of information they could find on the subjects of Hoover's encompassing curiosity.

It was immaterial to Hoover if the filed information was true or false. It could be evaluated

later. But file it! File everything! The director wanted every scrap saved.

The appalling truth that emerges from Robins's book is that law also was immaterial to Hoover. The FBI's authority extends only to suspected violations of federal law. In practice, Hoover ordered an investigation of any person whose ideas he disliked.

He hated ideas, distrusted them, feared their contagion. Thus he built files on people who had ideas. Writers are people who have ideas. Publicly Hoover could court them. Privately, as his memoranda make clear, he despised them.

For a ludicrous example of Hoover's paranoid mind at work, consider the 690-page file he accumulated on William F. Buckley Jr., editor of National Review. The file begins in 1941, when Buckley was 16 years old. His name went into the memory bank because his father was president of Pantepec Oil Co. of Venezuela, a foreign corporation.

Furriners! Aliens! Alarm bells rang in the FBI's Division of Internal Security. In 1948, Buckley Jr. attended an interregional convention of the National Student Association. An entry went into the files. In 1949, as chairman of the

Yale Daily News, Buckley asked a spokesman for the FBI to appear in a campus debate. Said the suspicious Hoover, in a memo turned up by Robins's research, "I don't like this at all."

By 1950 young Buckley had acquired excellent credentials as a patriotic, God-fearing American. An FBI agent filed a note that Buckley had been a guest speaker for a Foundation to Defeat Communism. Hoover was impressed. He offered Buckley a job as an FBI agent. Buckley was then an agent for the CIA. He politely declined.

Years passed, and the file on Buckley grew. In 1959 Hoover sent two agents covertly to cover a debate between Buckley and James Wechsler, editor of the New York Post. In 1962 Buckley took his son, Christopher, on a tour of the FBI building. Christopher dutifully sent a thank you note to Hoover. The note is in the Buckley file. Christopher was 10 years old.

"Then Buckley committed the unforgivable sin," Robins remarks. "He ridiculed Hoover." This was in a satirical piece in National Review that alleged, tongue plainly in cheek, that Hoover had been arrested on a morals charge. Hoover, a man utterly devoid of a sense of humor, never forgave the impudent editor.

The director ordered files on other writers. A few of them—very few—were Communists legitimately subject to surveillance as possible spies. The rest at some time had said something, or written something, sympathetic to socialism. They were pinkos. Hoover hated pinkos.

He especially hated pinko poets. They think too much. Such men are dangerous: Joyce Kilmer, Conrad Aiken, Robert Frost. He feared playwrights: William Inge, Clifford Odets, Moss Hart. He ordered that files be kept on Erle Stanley Gardner, writer of the Perry Mason novels, and Rex Stout, creator of Nero Wolfe. The names of Edna Ferber, Westbrook Pegler, Edith Wharton, H. L. Mencken went into the memory bank. He filed "rabble-rousers," "activists," "agitators."

Freedom of speech? Freedom of press? Freedom to believe? These were values that J. Edgar Hoover held in contempt.

The man was a monster. It is a travesty, but a fitting travesty, that the ugliest building on Pennsylvania Avenue should bear the name of the ugly man who ruled the FBI.

©1992, Universal Press Syndicate