

The Last Days of J. Edgar Hoover

by Jack Anderson

WASHINGTON, D.C.

In a dim, oak-paneled corner of Washington's Mayflower Hotel, the man with the familiar bulldog profile sat quietly talking to two friends. It was the usual lunch at the usual spot,



His mother, Annie Hoover, who taught him the Spartan virtues. There were few women in Hoover's life, and she had the most lasting impact on him.

but FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was telling an extraordinary story.

The White House, he said, had asked him to head an interagency committee, which would be authorized to use illegal wiretaps, mail searches and even burglaries against suspected subversives. Although the plan had the approval of President Nixon himself, the irascible investigator said he would not be a party to it. He told his astonished confidants, Clyde Tolson and Tom Webb, that he had personally stopped the plan.

One month later, Hoover quietly died in his sleep. Elements of the illegal plan, meanwhile, had been put into effect by a special para-police unit, which operated right out of the White House. This affront to American liberties, and Hoover's role in opposing it, remained hidden until the Watergate bubble burst a year after his death.

Now the same civil libertarians, who formerly condemned Hoover, are praising him. Only a man of his stature could have stopped the Orwellian White House plan. Some critics still

contend that Hoover saw it as a threat to his power. But Hoover always had a healthy distaste for the surreptitious and a distrust for grandiose security plans. In the 1940's, for example, he turned down the job of coordinating military and domestic counter-espionage. "This country," he said, "doesn't need a Himmler."

Almost everyone agrees that if the hard-nosed Hoover had been around, there would have been no Watergate coverup. The White House exasperation over his opposition to the internal security plan was expressed in one of the Watergate documents. "At some point," wrote White House aide Tom Charles Huston, "Hoover has to be told who is President."

Staying power

The word was whispered that President Nixon was about to ask the durable old bureaucrat to retire. But like other Presidents who may have wished to replace him, Nixon thought better of it.

For nearly five decades John Edgar Hoover cast a giant shadow over Washington. "He had that quality," said Senate Watergate Chairman Sam Ervin (D., N.C.), "that one's friends call firmness and one's enemies call obstinacy." It was a quality he had to the end.

His last days were filled, appropriately, with the controversy that had surrounded him throughout his career. The bootleggers and gangsters of the 1920's had given way to the skyjackers and revolutionaries of the 1970's. But the old man kept up on the big cases until May 2, 1972, the day he died.

Finding suspects

A week before the end, his agents nabbed five reputed Mafia figures from the notorious Joseph Colombo family at their hideout in upstate New York. Other agents tracked down a law enforcement student and charged him in a daring \$500,000 extortion-parachute skyjacking of a United Airlines jet. The FBI recovered all but \$30 of the loot.

Hoover followed these cases closely, his former associates recall. But his greatest concern during his final days, they remember, was the epidemic of police assaults. Attacks on policemen had reached 6000 per month. Dozens had been gunned down in the streets. To the old lawman, this was sympto-

matic of a society gone sour.

He felt his own life was threatened by long-haired radicals. One of his neighbors, a teen-ager with hair down to his shoulders, said the FBI chief wouldn't leave his bulletproof limousine to enter his home when long-haired youths were in the streets.

to permissiveness. During the last month of his life, he was heard to grump about such evils as Dr. Benjamin Spock and hedonism. He also blamed the rise in radicalism on the courts, which he felt were too lenient.

Those who listened to him philosophize say he remained an implacable

jailbreak at the cost of four lives. He looked upon her as a traitor to America and warned that the Communists sought to make her a martyr. Yet he would have disapproved of her subsequent acquittal, which stripped her of martyrdom.

Hoover spent his last days at the same routine he had always followed. At precisely 8:30 each morning, he climbed into his limousine, hunched down in the back seat on the right side and propped his hat up on the left side.

En route to FBI headquarters, the black Cadillac pulled behind an apartment building to pick up his lifelong companion, Clyde Tolson. This daily little drama was executed with such stealth that the doorman didn't even know Tolson was a tenant.

Hoover's salad

Shortly before noon, the two aging crime fighters slipped quietly into the Rib Room of the Mayflower Hotel for a quick, 20-minute lunch. They had a standing order, which was served as soon as they sat down. Hoover always ate grapefruit and cottage cheese salad.

At the office, Hoover followed the developments of the big FBI investigations and the construction of the new FBI building that now bears his name. It would be, he told everyone, "the West Point of law enforcement."

He would return home early in the afternoon, putter in his garden and romp with his two small cairn terriers. The colonial house, overlooking Washington's verdant Rock Creek Park, was loaded with memorabilia, ranging from a bronze bust of himself in the foyer to an antique stereo with a color-sound attachment. The walls were covered with fading photographs, the floors with Oriental rugs.

His mother's mark

There were few women in Hoover's life, but the one who had the most lasting impact was his mother. After his father died, Hoover brought his invalid mother into his home and for years provided her with devoted care. A God-fearing fundamentalist, Annie Hoover taught her son the Spartan virtues that he adhered to all his life.

His personal secretary, Miss Helen Gandy, was as devoted to the FBI director as he was to his mother. She

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But it was the new attitudes, say his friends, that caused him the most grief. Newspapers that once praised him began turning against him as he grew old in the job. Youngsters who once looked up to FBI agents began to scoff at them and to seek Abbie Hoffman's autograph rather than his own.

The crusty old G-man laid the cause

foe of communism to the end. He was disturbed over President Nixon's approaches to Peking, distrustful of the smile on Mao Tse-tung's face.

Hoover's anxiety over communism, friends recall, seemed to become personified in Angela Davis. She was an avowed Communist who then faced trial for allegedly aiding a California

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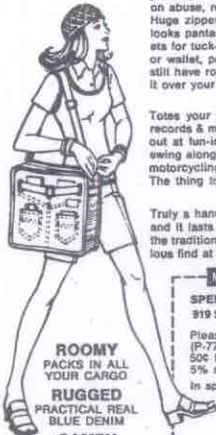
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INVESTIGATION



Hoover pictured in Washington with Clyde Tolson, the associate director of the FBI and his lifelong companion at whose apartment Hoover sat down to his last meal.

HOOVER CONTINUED

would only say that "we were all very proud of him."

There was one romantic interest in his life, a mystery woman unknown to many of his close associates. My own FBI-style investigation of Hoover uncovered a batch of love letters signed "Affectionately" and "With love" to Muriel Geier, an attractive Washington, D.C., widow. Local legend has it that when younger, the stunning Muriel inspired a cigar-maker to name his stogies after her.

Courtly and platonic

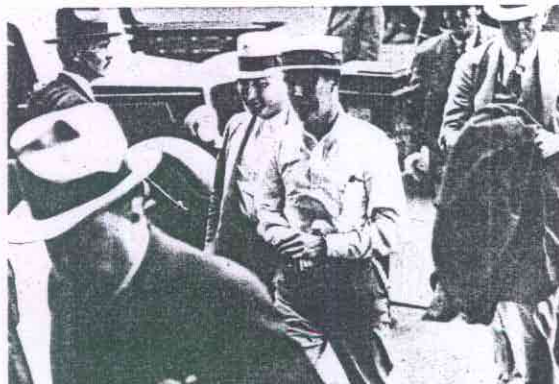
Hoover's relationship with Muriel appeared to have been courtly and platonic. His letters were personal but proper. When she was preparing for a European tour he offered to arrange special treatment for her with the U.S. Embassy in Paris. Later, he wrote that he would send two FBI agents to escort her from New York City's Kennedy Airport to the Waldorf. He hoped to see

her in New York, he added.

Hoover shared his last days with a few friends. "You are honored by your friends," he liked to repeat, "and you are distinguished by your enemies." He was "very distinguished," he'd boast.

But he was honored as well. He spent most of his leisure time with two old friends, bachelors like himself, Clyde Tolson and Harry Duncan. Their evening meal together became ritualized. On Mondays and Fridays, Tolson was the host. Duncan had Wednesdays and Saturdays. It was Hoover's turn on Sunday nights and Saturday mornings. He would plan the meals himself, writing out the menus in his shaky, old man's hand for his housekeeper, Anna Fields.

Saturday usually was reserved for Hoover's most celebrated vice: the horse races. The three bachelors would meet at Hoover's home for breakfast, and then proceed to Maryland's Pimlico racetrack. He never bet more than \$2 on a race.



The chief of the FBI in action: Hoover leads the way in this 1936 photo as Alvin Karpis, "Public Enemy No. 1" (center, manacled), is led into court in St. Paul, Minn.



1972: FBI Director Hoover celebrates his 77th and final birthday aboard the Presidential plane with Nixon and Mrs. William P. Rogers, wife of the Secretary of State. Watergate revealed Hoover opposed White House plan of illegal taps and burglary.

Hoover's last weekend did not depart from his routine, he spent his last Saturday, as usual, at the racetrack. On Sunday, he puttered in his garden for a few hours and visited briefly with a neighbor. He watched the FBI television program on his color TV set before going to bed.

Business as usual

On Monday morning, he was in his limousine by 8:30. He spent part of the morning at a meeting with two agents who had just passed their 20-year anniversaries. He joined Tolson at the Mayflower for the usual lunch. In the afternoon, he met with the safety director of Knoxville, Tenn.

He left the FBI building with a smile and waved to some passing agents at 5 p.m. His last meal was with his old friend Tolson at Tolson's apartment. The director returned home in time to catch a little television before going to bed. He was found dead by Annie Fields the next morning when she went into his room to wake him. His personal physician, Dr. Robert V. Choisser, was summoned. The coroner described the cause of death as "hypertensive cardiovascular disease," which is associated with high blood pressure.

Hoover was dead, and he couldn't be replaced. The bureau he had loved became compromised thereafter by men who couldn't resist turning its awesome power to their political ends.

J. Edgar Hoover built a formidable law enforcement agency that had been untouched by scandal for half a century. In the 1930's, his agents closed in with machine guns blazing on the likes of Ma Barker and Bonnie and Clyde. In the 1940's, Hoover's men nabbed dozens of Nazi spies. Yet, to his credit, he opposed the internment of Japanese-Americans by the government. The 1950's intensified the Communist menace, which became a Hoover obsession. His men thoroughly infiltrated the American Communist Party.

Recently, though

In the 1960's, Hoover's orthodox modus operandi began to look outmoded in the fast-paced, flexible times. He viewed dissenters with a jaundiced eye and often cried conspiracy when none existed. He was an incurable curmudgeon, conservative in his ways, often narrow in his outlook, who fiercely believed the words "My country, right or wrong."

Although he strove to keep the FBI from becoming a political police force, the bu-

reau collected a mountain of catalogued minutiae about American citizens who had committed no crimes. Read singly, these political files seem merely another dreary example of bureaucratic excess. Examined in larger lots, they provide a case-by-case study of just how far the government has intruded into the lives of Americans.

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I began a mini-FBI probe into Hoover in 1971 because he had become such an awesome figure that Presidents, Members of Congress and newsmen alike were often afraid to criticize him. I thought it was time someone pried into his personal life in the FBI manner and reported the excesses of the man behind the myth. Sometimes, I felt like a David hurling pebbles at America's most enduring symbol of strength and integrity. However, Hoover had become a sacred cow with almost unchecked power.

Demanding standard

My criticism of Hoover was one of his pet peeves in his last years. His friends say he would "explode" every time I mentioned him in a column. Yet any fair-minded critic would have to agree that Hoover's virtues surpassed his vices. He revolutionized crime detection methods, and set a demanding standard of conduct for lawmen.

Columnist Andrew Tully claims to have obtained probably the last interview with Hoover. The interview was "off the record," not for publication until after his death. According to Tully, Hoover wanted to remain FBI director "to protect President Nixon from the people around him." Tully said Hoover was referring to such former intimates as Attorney General John Mitchell, White House advisers H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, and counsel John Dean. Tully said Hoover told him in a January, 1972, interview that these "kindergarten" types had forced him "to put the kibosh on one crazy intelligence campaign against subversives."

Feared and revered

The revered Hoover not only lasted on top of the bureaucracy longer than any other American, but he also became the most powerful and feared bureaucrat in the history of the Republic. His bulldog visage became a national symbol of the crusade against public enemies, Communist spies, and other

5 of the 8 Presidents he served in his 48 years as FBI head



WITH ROOSEVELT



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WITH JOHNSON

forces of evil.

He had the straightforward charm of a man who spoke his mind regardless of the consequences. Those closest to him knew him as warm and generous. His waiter at the Mayflower called him "jolly," and the ice cream vendor who stood for years outside the FBI building wept when Hoover died.

Hoover spent his last days as he spent his life: devoted to the FBI, his friends and his country. Almost certainly, the Watergate excesses would never have happened if he had lived one more year.