



Whispers about J. Edgar Hoover are out in the open now.

HOOVER

*In an Age of Heroes, We Made Him One.
Now We're Rooting for the Villain.*

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Washington Post Staff Writer

For half the 20th century, whispers followed along behind J. Edgar Hoover like the little dust clouds behind cartoon characters.

The rumors of homosexuality. The Kennedy-bugging. The Nixon-blackmailing. The communist witch hunts. The smearing of Martin Luther King Jr. The self-promotion that transformed a file clerk who lived with his mother into a gangbusting bulwark against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

But the whispers stayed whispers. There were secrets we didn't want to know. It was a matter of national security, really. Or insecurity. America wanted Hoover-as-hero, not Hoover-as-villain.

Now, 21 years after his death, his villainy swells like a great carbuncular growth: a scandalous best-selling book, a tell-all TV show and endless wisecracks describing transvestite orgies, graft, treason, endless crimes.

O fickle public.

In his heyday, Hoover belonged to a lost age of American heroes: Lindbergh, Henry Ford, Babe Ruth, Douglas MacArthur, Amelia Earhart, Einstein, Douglas Fairbanks, Joe Louis. The Lone Ranger gave Hoover a silver bullet. Shirley Temple gave him a hug. He understood that in an era when no one knew the difference between personality and character, he didn't have to seize power, he could just let the people give it to him in the form of stardom.

During his lifetime (1895 to 1972), most of it spent holding absolute sway over the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1924 to 1972), few Americans would have paid attention to a book in which a woman provided the following description of Hoover, at 62 or 63, in a suite at the Plaza hotel:

"He was wearing a fluffy black dress, very fluffy, with flounces, and lace stockings and high heels, and a black curly wig. He had makeup on, and false eyelashes. It was a very short skirt, and he was sitting there in the living room of the suite with his legs crossed. Roy [Cohn] introduced him to me as 'Mary' and he replied, 'Good evening,' brusque, like the

first time I'd met him. It was obvious he wasn't a woman, you could see where he shaved. It was Hoover. You've never seen anything like it. I couldn't believe it that I should see the head of the FBI dressed up as a woman."

This is a scene from "Official and Confidential—The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover," a book by Anthony Summers. The woman is Susan Rosenstiel. She was the wife of Lewis Rosenstiel, a bisexual who owned the Schenley distilleries and hung around with both Hoover and Mafiosi, Summers says.

The book is on the bestseller list. It chronicles endless high crimes and misdemeanors. A "Frontline" television show covered the same ground and got big ratings. The New Yorker called the newly revealed Hoover a "G-man in a G-string" and ran two cartoons. One showed a doorway bearing the words: "THE JAYE EDGAR HOOVER BUILDING." The other showed one disconsolate FBI agent saying to another, "Has anyone considered that maybe his dress was a disguise?" In a mock ceremony on "The Tonight Show," Jay Leno described the age of Sen. Strom Thurmond by saying: "When Strom Thurmond first went to Washington, J. Edgar Hoover was still walking around in a training bra." The people who used to call him "Jedgar Hoover" now call him "Gay Edgar Hoover."

A model for American manhood—he once wrote a piece called "What Makes Men Strong" for *This Week* magazine—is now charged with being a hypocritical drag queen (with bad taste in clothes, too—I mean, ruffles). It's not so much that we're tearing down a hero as we're building a villain. The man who became a legend for solving the crimes of the century is accused now of committing them.

Summers claims: Hoover could have stopped the attack on Pearl Harbor. He went easy on the Mafia because Meyer Lansky threatened to reveal pictures of him having sex with a man. He may have been behind the shooting of John Kennedy. He promoted Clyde Tolson, an agent with three years on the job, to number two man in the bureau because they were lovers. He tried to hound Martin Luther King into killing himself, and

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spent the day at the racetrack when James Earl Ray killed King in Memphis. He kept Supreme Court justices under surveillance. He spied on political conventions. He committed character assassination and rewrote history, and did them both on a Soviet scale.

The strange thing is that we've had a lot of heroes with ugly sides—Lindbergh the fascist, John Kennedy the sexual obsessive and so on—but we've pitied or forgiven their nastiness, or forgotten it.

Whence this fury toward Hoover—these yelps of resentment, this frantic sifting of the fossil bed for coprolite?

Big Guy

It was 1968, the late spring of a bad year. The FBI guy led us through the halls. He was all good manners, with the apologetic cheer of a seasoned gofer. He'd talked us—maybe half a dozen reporters—into putting down the newspapers we were reading in the Senate press gallery, and following him through Senate hallways without knowing why.

Or maybe he was like a lot of cops back then, trying to show us he was hip. With a Day-Glo generation of American youth stoned and rampant coast to coast, the old square-jawed hat-wearing Everyman FBI agent was a joke.

It was a particularly bad year for J. Edgar Hoover and everything he represented—the earnest, red-blooded, white-skinned God-bless-America folks who worked hard, always got the right tools for the job, and put the tools back when they were through. Now the country was full of dopers and rioters—criminals who refused to admit they were criminals. Things were getting ugly—the smog of Vietnam shrinking moral horizons, and tear gas lingering in the back of America's throat after the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Everybody knew how Hoover had persecuted King—bugging him, redbaiting him, giving tapes of his love life to the media. Then, when King was killed in Memphis in April, Hoover refused to hunt for the killer, on grounds that the killing wasn't a federal offense. The attorney general had overruled him. Now, in late spring, weeks and weeks had gone by and with thousands of agents on the case, Hoover still hadn't caught James Earl Ray. People were saying he didn't want to.

The gofer led us to a big wooden door. He opened it with courtly edginess.

Sitting on a table, one shoe touching the floor, was Hoover. Clearly, he was waiting for us, posed on the table with the coy informality of those old Daily News shots of chorus girls arriving in New York on ocean lin-

ers. There was a sense of old, oiled machinery at work. His face looked as if it might have just risen out of his collar like a meat periscope. It was the face of the grandmother you were always afraid of, with oddly dark, luxuriant, implacable eyes. There were bright round red spots on each cheekbone, very precise, in the manner of the painted spots on a puppet's cheeks. His mouth was a thin little business that wandered across his chin on a diagonal, like the chart of a bad stock market.

"Com'on in, boys," he said.

Boys? Who was the last person to call reporters boys? Jimmy Cagney? Was this rehearsed, or was it just old-fashioned? He was a regular museum of forgotten Big Guy moves.

"I want to give you the lowdown on this James Earl Ray business," he said. "But don't take out the notebooks, this is all strictly on the Q.T."

Saboteurs and other rats Reach in panic for their hats.

—Saturday Evening Post, 1943

In the 1950s, he could "make water run uphill," as Jimmy Stewart said in "The FBI Story." It was Cold War time. Hoover stood up for God and family against the atom spies, and drove stakes through the hearts of "the vampires of international communism," as he called them in a book called "Masters of Deceit," which went through more than 20 printings. More and more, he pronounced on faith and morals and the virtues of church and family.

He was a celebrity who vacationed in Palm Beach and drank at the Stork Club with Walter Winchell. He thought seriously about running for president against Franklin D. Roosevelt.

A press release from the FBI in 1944 borrowed the style of Time magazine to say: "Tough, and looks it, is MR. J. EDGAR HOOVER, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation of America has a sensational record for bringing public enemies of all kinds, including the notorious kidnapping gangs, to justice is the hero of all American schoolboys."

Almost all.

"Dear Mr. Hoover,

"There is a boy I know named Red Hopkins. . . . He took your picture and put it on a poster and wrote WANTED below the picture. I am not a squealer, but I think you should know about Red Hopkins.

Sincerely,

Mark K.

Birmingham, Michigan

—Kids' Letters to the FBI, 1966

"A star in his own right," said a Hollywood producer about meeting him. "I felt much as I did when I met Cary Grant."

In "G-Men," Richard Gid Powers writes: "Once Hoover's stardom had been conferred, no one who depended on the public's good will (and by definition that included presidents and attorneys general) could afford to cross Hoover within his field of acknowledged supremacy. Hoover's power was given to him by the public, not by his superiors, and only the public could take it away."

In 1972, as Hoover lay in state in the Capital Rotunda, Nixon gave a eulogy that showed how well he understood the half-century dance Hoover had done with the public.

"He became a living legend while still a young man, and he lived up to his legend as the decades passed . . . the invincible and incorruptible defender of every American's precious right to be free from fear."

Six months later, Nixon said to John Dean: "He's got files on everybody, God damn it."

Lowdown. Q. T.

He told us he was going to catch Ray. He took no questions. He left by a rear door.

I thought: Time stopped for this guy in 1938.

Captain America

Hard to imagine now what he meant to America in 1938.

In the despair of the Depression the public needed a hero who could whip the evil that was abroad in the land. Hoover did the job by having his men gun down gangsters like John Dillinger. Gangbusting made the FBI the heroes in countless radio shows, comic strips, movies, trading cards, Junior G-Man clubs and Junior G-Man detective kits. In a detective magazine called "The Feds," Hoover, the popularizer of "Public Enemy Number One," was "Public Hero Number One."

At a hearing in 1936, Sen. Kenneth McKellar attacked Hoover for running a publicity mill at the FBI, then asked him: "Did you ever make an arrest?"

"No, sir," Hoover said.

A bad moment.

In fact, Hoover had no desire to be thought of as an action detective. He wanted the public to love the bureau as a team of scientific, disciplined civil servants solving crimes through the sifting of records and the laboratory study of tire treads and fiber samples.

But the public wanted G-man action detectives. And Hoover knew what the public wanted. A few weeks after McKellar embarrassed him, he flew to New Orleans for his first arrest: Alvin "Creepy" Karpis, the last member of Ma Barker's gang. He couldn't

put the cuffs on Karpis because he didn't have any, nor did any of the other agents on the scene. Somebody took off a necktie and tied his hands. More arrests followed as Hoover yielded to the public's need to make him into a tough guy who liked a scrap.

"HOOVER SAYS STICK 'EM UP," said the New York Journal.

The idea of the FBI action detective had its ultimate apotheosis at the start of World War II when a comic book showed the FBI creating not just another brave agent, but

"I want to give you the lowdown on this James Earl Ray business," he said. "But don't take out the notebooks, this is all strictly on the Q.T."

Captain America, "the first of a corps of super-agents whose mental and physical ability will make them a terror to spies and saboteurs." Along with Dillinger's death mask and Creepy Karpis's guns, people taking the FBI tour get to see a huge wall painting of a macromuscular superheroic Captain America with red, white and blue superhero tights and a shield.

During the war, Hoover was our shield while the country lay awake imagining Nazi spies paddling ashore from darkened submarines.

"We know that our protection against some of the most dangerous of them has been, and is, in the hands of Director J. Edgar Hoover," said Liberty magazine.

"The iron-jawed Chief," said G-Men magazine.

Public Enemies One-on-down

Shudder as he goes to town.

And a month after that:

Dean: "I'm convinced the FBI isn't everything the public thinks it is."

Nixon: "No."

Dean: "I know quite well it isn't."

In 1937, The New Yorker described Hoover as being "almost six feet tall."

In 1972, after he died, a niece named Margaret Fennell was reported as looking down at him and thinking that he looked "smaller than I remembered."

In 1991, Curt Gentry wrote in "J. Edgar Hoover—the Man and the Secrets" that

Hoover compensated for his "shortness" by putting a raised dais under his desk, avoiding tall people at parties and keeping tall agents out of headquarters positions.

And in 1993 Summers writes in "Official and Confidential" that "under their breath, agents would come to call Edgar 'Kid Napoleon.' He was dictatorial and diminutive in stature—estimates of his height vary between five feet seven inches and five feet ten inches, the higher figure being the one he had entered in his personnel record."

Villain

When did the public start wanting Hoover as villain the way they had wanted him as hero?

In 1951, a writer named Max Lowenthal attacked Hoover in a book called "The Federal Bureau of Investigation." But he was preaching only to the left-wing choir.

Powers writes: "The general public was simply not interested in bad news about the bureau, no matter how sensational or convincing."

Then the '60s. Did Hoover understand the implications of James Bond, and did he see that the CIA had stolen the FBI's glamour, spy masters taking over from gangbusters? Did he understand why nobody wanted to tune in to "I Was a Communist for the FBI" anymore?

The Chicago Tribune ran an editorial under the headline: "Next Target of the Lefties." With McCarthy, Hoover was next, the Tribune warned.

The case has been made that the general public first got interested in the dark side of Hoover in 1964, after he met with 18 female journalists in Washington and told them that Martin Luther King was "the most notorious liar in the country."

Did he think he was safe because they were women? His public relations man, Cartha DeLoach, kept passing him notes telling him to put the statement off the record.

Hoover told the reporters he wanted it on the record.

In the ruckus that followed, Hoover re-

fused to back down. He said King was "one of the lowest characters in the country. . . . I haven't even begun to say all I could on this subject."

By the time I ran into him in 1968, the dope culture, the New Left, the communards, the hip young university teachers, the freaks, crazies and professional paranoids of Bohemia were creating a new Hoover—the iron chancellor of the country club fascists, the Gestapoid shredder of civil rights, the doomed and bogus totalitarian. He was the

perfect enemy and *bete noire*.

The same year, the first of a string of books by an angry ex-agent appeared: "Inside the FBI" by Norman Ollestad. In 1970, "Hoover's FBI" by William Turner bore a cover picture of Hoover glancing upwards with a tired sneer as if he heard the artillery getting closer to the bunker.

In 1972, Time magazine eulogized Hoover as "one of the greats." By 1975, after Nixon's Watergate resignation had shaken faith in government, Time ran a picture of a nasty, pathetic Hoover.

"The legend is crumbling," the story began.

Senility. Homosexuality. Racism. PR hooey about the gangster cases. Thin evidence in the commie spy cases.

The media had known this stuff for years. Why hadn't they printed it? Fear of Hoover would be the obvious answer, but fear of the American people is probably a better one. In any case, to dwell on the facts was to miss the point. He was a legend, and we all—media and the public—had chosen to believe it rather than attack it.

Of course, if he was our Hoover, we could do whatever we wanted with him. We've spent the last 15 years turning him into a villain.

In 1978, a six-hour television docudrama called "King" described Hoover as "a harassing racist psychopath fighting the specter of black insurrection," and it implicated him in the assassination.

In 1979, David Levine caricatured Hoover as a sort of crazed, melting carbuncle with wall eyes.

G. Gordon Liddy, talk show host, felon and former FBI agent, writes in the current

Forbes FYI: "It is curious that, at a time when the Left is marshaling all the forces of political correctness in an effort to win for homosexuality equivalency of place with heterosexuality, both culturally and legally, it nevertheless hurls the accusation of homosexuality (upon no evidence whatsoever) at its enemy, the late director of the FBI."

Thus does politics make hypocrites of us all.

Maybe if he'd been a man of action we could forgive him more. Then again, he wouldn't have offered us the Walter Mitty spectacle of file clerk as hero. Maybe if he hadn't been such a preacher in the 1950s, there wouldn't be such joy in defrocking him. If he hadn't been so frightening, we wouldn't be laughing so hard.

As a new Kennedy generation of technocrats, journalists and academics gained power, Hoover held to his old loyalties to Mr.



FBI chief Hoover, left, and agent Clyde Tolson in 1936. A recently published book claims that Hoover gave Tolson a promotion because they were lovers.

and Mrs. Front Porch USA. As for protecting himself, Hoover may have had files on everyone, but after 40 years in office, the media and the universities were acquiring quite a file on *him*. And Hoover was a hypocrite, that favorite leper of the new class, which shuns calling someone a sinner, but learned in college that the root of all evil is a contradiction.

Nazi hunter/Nazi, gangbuster/gangster, gay basher/closet queen, action detective/file clerk: He is the picture of Dorian Gray melting into depravity, he is Gregor Samsa—Kafka's bureaucrat who turns into a cockroach. It's as if Toto had pulled away the curtain, and the Wizard of Oz turned out to be a little toad of a man, flapping his arms and hissing: "Public enemy! Public enemy!"