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The Case Against Hoover

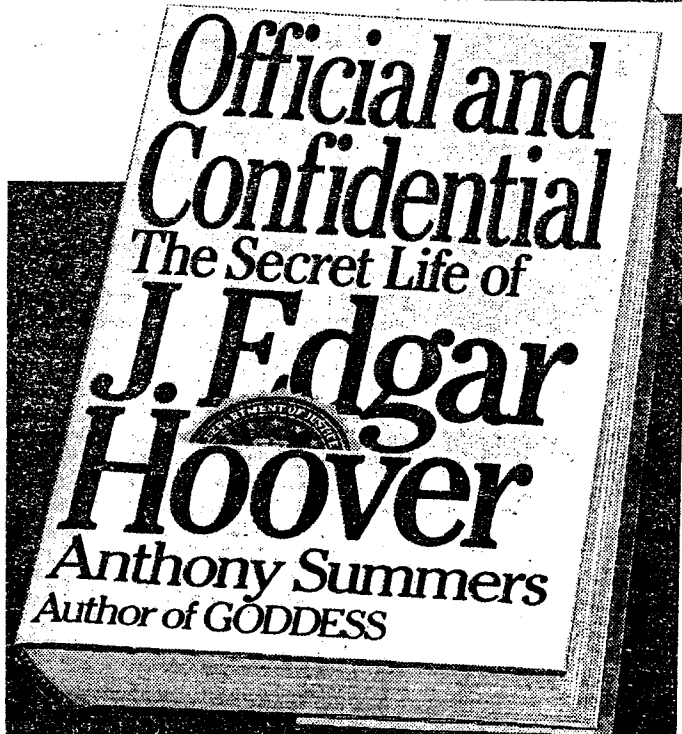
OFFICIAL AND CONFIDENTIAL
The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover
By Anthony Summers
Putnam. 528 pp. \$25.95

By Stephen E. Ambrose

DRAWING ON anonymous and hostile sources, making extensive use of the Freedom of Information Act and other techniques of investigative reporting, and relying heavily on innuendo, rumor, hearsay and his own speculations, Irish-based author Anthony Summers depicts FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover as a moral and political monster without a single redeeming feature. In Summers's view, Hoover did great harm to uncountable individuals as well as to institutions and organizations, to civil rights and liberties, to democracy itself. That he was our top cop for half a century, and that during all that

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At last, the truth about J. Edgar Hoover



"Anthony Summers' book on J. Edgar Hoover is the exposure we've been waiting for these last forty years. What an enjoyable and rueful read! J. Edgar Hoover did more harm to the

time neither Congress nor the contemporary media ever had the fortitude to investigate Hoover and the FBI, Summers regards as a national disgrace.

Much of the material here is familiar, already covered in detail in Richard Gid Powers's 1978 biography: Hoover's political manipulations, his secret files on (apparently) every politician in Washington and his use of those files for blackmailing purposes, his infatuation with himself, his dictatorship at the FBI, his use of *agents provocateurs*, his refusal to pursue organized crime, and more.

But the two biographers are often in disagreement. Powers dismisses as "preposterous" the charge that Hoover was responsible for the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor; Summers devotes an entire chapter to it. In general, in my opinion, in areas of disagreement Powers's work is better researched and more reliable than Summers's.

Except, perhaps, on the biggest disagreement of all, which is the heart of Summers's book: the sex life of J. Edgar Hoover. Powers found no convincing evidence to prove the widely held belief that Hoover was a homosexual; Summers presents an abundance of evidence to show that he was.

Summers is the author of a biography of Marilyn Monroe and of a Kennedy-assassination conspiracy theory book (both of which figure prominently in his Hoover biography, with broad hints that Hoover had a hand in both deaths.) He despises Hoover and is contemptuous of him, to the point that he calls his subject by his first name throughout, in order "to bring him into mortal perspective." Summers characterizes "Edgar" as "a man with a crippled psyche,

capable of great evil . . . well suited for high office in Nazi Germany."

Summers's most sensational charge is that Hoover was a transvestite. His source is Susan Rosenstiel, ex-wife of Lewis Rosenstiel, a long-time friend of Hoover and the head of Schenley Industries. Thirty years after the event, and following a full decade of bitter battles in divorce courts with her former husband, she said in an interview that on two occasions while they were still married Rosenstiel took her to an orgy in a suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York. Roy

Cohn—the New York lawyer and former associate of Sen. Joseph McCarthy—was there, she said, along with a couple of "young blond boys" and the director of the FBI. "Edgar was dressed up as a woman, in full drag." Summers goes on to quote—in graphic detail—Susan Rosenstiel's account of what happened.

Summers writes that the CIA had photographs of Hoover engaged in homosexual acts with the No. 2 man at the FBI, Clyde Tolson, and that during the struggle between the CIA and the FBI for control of

foreign intelligence after World War II the CIA gave the negatives to crime boss Meyer Lansky, who used them to blackmail Hoover. This explains, according to Summers, why Hoover denied for decades that there was a Mafia in America, and why he never went after organized crime. The master blackmailer had been blackmailed.

Summers sees Hoover as a man of immense power. He writes, "Edgar, more than any other individual, [was] responsible for the long episode of anti-Communist hysteria from which American society has never fully recovered." Surely, considering the list of possible candidates, that judgment exaggerates Hoover's role. Nor is it possible to believe his contention that this country, from the 1920s to the 1970s, was corrupt to its core, or that the connections between the top criminals, politicians and businessmen are as intimate as he suggests. Still, Summers is right to note that in his various assaults on individuals and groups, "Edgar had many accomplices, including Presidents . . . who went along with his excesses because it suited their political purposes."

In his conclusion, Summers points out that the Russian people have renamed Stalingrad and Leningrad and pulled down the statues to those two men. He suggests that it is time to be as courageous and honest by taking the name off the J. Edgar Hoover Building. But to equate Hoover, for all his sins, with Lenin and Stalin is ridiculous, as is the idea that we should take names off public buildings in Washington because of discoveries about the true character of some of the men they are named for. Such a process, once started, would never end. ■



REUTER—BETTMAN ARCHIVE

FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover (left) with Clyde Tolson in 1936