

J. Edgar Hoover, by Curt Gentry; review by Athan Theoharis 11/3/91

Today's Washington Post review illustrates the unwisdom of assigning the author of a competitive book to review a newer one on the same subject.

From my dealings with both men I have reason not to accept either as fully informative or fair, Gentry because he lied in the book he ghosted for Francis Gary Powers and his U-2 flight shot down over the USSR and Theoharis because he has consistently sought to make it appear that his is the only basic and dependable work, all-inclusives when it is not, very good as it is, and because he has pretended that my work at least, is his. (I gave him hundreds of pages of FBI reports he credited to the FBI, not me, and he was so stingy that he did not even send me a copy of his book.)

Theoharis begins his review with two paragraphs ^{partly of praise} largely praising in part of ^{these} two paragraphs and in its concluding sentence and he devotes the rest of the half-page review, beginning in the second paragraph, ^{to} telling the readers why they ^{should} not get or even trust it.

He criticizes Gentry for accepting "misinformation" from "his FBI sources," ^{including former officials,} who may well have been Gentry's source for saying that Hoover had certain FBI records Theoharis says do not exist. In this Theoharis covers himself with a single word, "extant," referring to Hoover's two special series of office files, Official and Personal and Confidential. He does not address whether the files he says do not exist could have been among the many destroyed by Hoover's private secretary, Helen Gandy.

^{one of} In fact, where he is supposedly talking about these "extant" two files, specifically "celebrity files," Theoharis states explicitly "there are no such files." He is careful not to say in these "extant" remains. In fact there are many such files that the FBI has, some of which I've obtained by virtue of duplicate filing, mine being the duplicate copies.

One of his perhaps accurate criticisms of Gentry relates to a list of records to be destroyed on ^{Hoover's} death. Theoharis says there was no need for any such list because Gandy destroyed those records. What she destroyed is copies that were in Hoover's personal files. Only if there were no other copies, which I'm inclined to believe was not true, would Theoharis' criticism be valid. and all the many pages I have from these two Hoover ^{office} personal files are in fact duplicates. Destroying them while leaving the originals or other duplicates in file would ^{defeat} ^{Gandy's} the purpose of destruction.

Theoharis' own scholarship is subject to question. He filed FOIA requests and he accepted what he got in response without taking any one case to court when it is impossible that he got full compliance with his requests. Thus he wrote not only based on known incompleteness, one of his criticisms of Gentry, he also did the FBI a favor by making it possible for it to claim properly that all it had to disclose in response to duplicating requests is what it opted to let Theoharis have.

The review also serves to advertise Theoharis' competitive books.

The Man Who Knew Too Much

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J. EDGAR HOOVER
The Man and the Secrets
By Curt Gentry
Norton. 846 pp. \$29.95

By Athan G. Theoharis

THE LIFE of J. Edgar Hoover, who for 48 years served as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, inevitably commands interest—a man who turned the FBI into a powerful, virtually autonomous agency and transformed his relationship with presidents and attorneys general from trusted subordinate to coequal (even Harry Truman, who risked political suicide when firing General Douglas MacArthur, quickly rebuffed suggestions that he fire Hoover, despite his own doubts about Hoover's methods and loyalty). Curt Gentry's massive biography is but the latest attempt to understand "the man and the secrets."

Gentry's book is a comprehensive and well-written survey of Hoover's tenure as director of the bureau, and provides insights into how Hoover turned a relatively inconsequential office into an agency that influenced American politics from the 1930s. It is a fascinating story about how Hoover amassed, used and abused power. Nonetheless it is a flawed book. There are a number of errors that stem from Gentry's failure to research sensitive FBI records and he often uncritically accepts misinformation offered by (anonymous) former FBI agents and officials.

Gentry claims, for example, to have researched Hoover's extant Official and Confidential File, as well as that of former FBI Assistant Director Louis Nichols. He describes their contents thus: Nichols's file includes "personal information, sometimes derogatory" on members of Congress ranging from "such factual documen-



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Hoover demonstrating submachine gun to baseball manager Mickey Cochrane in 1935

and favored FBI officials frequently viewed pornographic movies (a favorite was a film of a "well-known female singer") in a private "blue room" in the Crime Records Division. But he is apparently unaware that in 1925 Hoover authorized the creation of an Obscene File to maintain "obscene or indecent" material. This special file contained, by the 1960s, a permanent collection of more than 10,000 "stag films," photographs, comic strips, playing cards, books and pamphlets. The collection, whether or not Hoover had a personal interest in