

Hoover Hunted Inept Communists

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

The late J. Edgar Hoover was an incurable curmudgeon, conservative in his ways, narrow in his outlook, who fiercely believed the words, "my country, right or wrong."

He used his enormous power as director of the FBI to uphold his viewpoints. The least opposition, by his lights, bordered on treason.

In the name of patriotism, he brought a touch of totalitarianism to the United States. It is important, therefore, to understand how he operated.

This is the reason we have been dwelling on his record. In past columns, we have reported how he collected potential blackmail on prominent Americans, how he used his files to intimidate our elected leaders, how he destroyed with whispers those who crossed him.

All the while, he posed as the crusader against public enemies, Communist spies and other forces of evil. In his latter years, he devoted most of his energies to spy chasing.

He concentrated upon the Communist Party, USA—a collection of cranks who mimicked Moscow and shook their fists at Washington. However, they were poor spies, who made little attempt to disguise their activities, but, on the contrary, tried to attract the spotlight.

The professionals, who did the real spying, avoided the spotlight. They stayed carefully in the shadows, keeping as inconspicuous as possible.

Meanwhile, the Communist Party was easy to infiltrate, and the card-carrying Communists were easy to identify. So Hoover built up the party as a national menace, which the FBI could triumphantly, if conveniently, expose.

The more Hoover attacked the party fanatics, the more the real spies must have

secretly smiled. Counterespionage experts have told us bitterly that Hoover assigned hundreds of agents to investigate the noisy fanatics while the real spies were left undetected.

The old FBI bulldog, according to former associates, was more interested in appearances than in results. His agents had spent five years, for example, planting a counterspy upon the Czechs. It was one of the FBI's major successes in penetrating a sophisticated spy ring.

The Czechs came to trust the counterspy, who planted a microphone for them behind a bookcase in the State Department's Czechoslovakian Affairs office. This gave the United States a unique opportunity to feed phony information into the microphone and, thereby, to confuse the Soviet bloc with plausible but false facts, figures and names.

Yet Hoover was so delighted over a legitimate espionage success that, for the sake of two days of favorable publicity, he boasted to the press about the Czech eavesdropping and blew the whole operation.

Instead of the confusion that could have been spread, Hoover got two lower-level Czech diplomats kicked out of the country. The agents who worked five years on the case still grumble over the disaster.

Hoover's concern about appearances went so far that he insisted his surveillance teams not only should use standard sedans but should keep them washed. The FBI sedans soon became so recognizable that the G-men may as well have been driving painted police cars.

Agents engaged in some vital surveillance in the Midwest begged Washington to let them rent some old taxicabs that would look less suspicious. But Hoover told an aide angrily: "I won't approve any use of taxicabs."

As a result, the spies quickly detected

the spic-and-span sedans following them around, and the surveillance had to be dropped. It was Hoover's fixation on cleanliness, complained one agent, that made the FBI cars even more obvious.

"To hell with the spies!" bellowed the agent. "I'm gonna wash my car. I can't get in trouble if I bungle a case, but I can get fired if I don't wash my (expletive deleted) car!"

To save money, Hoover also used junky, antiquated surveillance devices, which were adequate enough to fool the party regulars but were easily detected by the professional spies.

A Soviet-bloc spy, for example, quickly discovered a bug that the FBI had planted in his office. U.S. counterspies learned that he took it to his bosses who laughed uproariously at its antique construction. They concluded that it must have been planted by some amateur local police, because they assumed erroneously that the FBI wouldn't use such obsolete equipment.

Another time, agents managed to attach a magnetic beeper to a spy's car so they could follow at a distance. But the signal faded, and they lost the car. An old device had been used because the FBI was too cheap to buy modern homing devices which could be slipped into the gasoline tank.

The FBI's most famous spy case was the arrest of Soviet agent Rudolf Abel in New York City. While FBI agents did some excellent surveillance work, the case was really broken when a member of Abel's ring simply walked into a U.S. intelligence office and spilled the beans on Abel's operation.

From our own examination of the FBI's counterintelligence work, which is now under study also by both the Senate and House, we are convinced that it should be split off from the routine criminal investigations.