

The Rise and Fall of the No. 1 Defender of America's

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Wham, smash, crack, the statues of J. Edgar Hoover are being pulled down. The figure who was once called Public Hero Number One is being defaced and displaced with the same energy the mob uses to destroy the effigies of fallen dictators.

Regardless of how gratifying is the sound of ikon shards being crunched under foot, the anger at the man's memory doesn't explain his extraordinary career. The man ran the FBI for 46 years. There's never been a figure

like him in power, fame and longevity in office.

The explanations offered for his apotheosis from mere bureaucrat to

Poster

immortal law enforcer are unsatisfactory. The blackmail theory won't wash at all. He couldn't have stayed in office so long by threatening to expose any president who'd dare fire him. In the first place, not every president is as blackmailable as a John Kennedy or a

Richard Nixon. Secondly, blackmail material about incumbent presidents is totally useless. The media won't touch it. Even recently dead presidents get a good deal of protection. Vide how long it has taken for just some of the Kennedy material to trickle out.

The second explanation is that Hoover was politically too popular to fire. Presidents have fired heroes before. They don't do it often, yet Truman fired MacArthur and, though there was a frightful hubbub about it, America's Old Roman could do nothing but retire to a grumbling but opulent private life. J.

Edgar, however, rose above simple hero status to being, not merely a legend in his own time, but the national mythic principle of goodness in combat with evil.

No other living American government figure has done it. The man was unique. Even Lincoln and Washington had to undergo death before deification. How the late FBI director did it is brilliantly described by Richard Gid Powers in an article entitled "J. Edgar Hoover and the Detective Hero," (Journal of Popular Culture, No. IX:2, Bowling Green University). "What Hoover did," Powers writes,

"was to infiltrate the action detective story." The action detective story, as opposed to the Edgar Allan Poe, Ellery Queen, Dorothy Sayers tradition, is a lower class, more popular morality epic which concentrates, not on the intellectual penetration of clues, but the symbolic chase and defeat of evil by a figure embodying goodness, stability and virtues. The action hero is Nick Carter, Dick Tracy, Charlie Chan and James Bond.

Hoover's propensity for arranging good news coverage for himself has often been remarked upon but Powers is the

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himself. Moving along into television, "The FBI" show made Efrem Zimbalist Jr. so much the quintessential agent that Powers says Hoover "even began to make his long-standing requirement that applicants 'look like agents' more specific: He began to demand that they conform to the 'Jimmy image.'" Hoover's injection of himself and his agency into the realm of fiction and

imagination was purposeful. He had writer Rex Collier go through the Bureau's files to get material for the FBI comic strip, "War on Crime," which went along with the 1930s bubblegum-card series called "G-Men and Heroes of the Law." If the kids didn't what to trade G-Men cards they could study the back of their Post Toasties cereal box where they could read about the Melvin Purvis G-Man Law and Order Patrol. (Purvis was Hoover's assistant in those

days.)

There were movies without number. Powers lists the titles of some of the more famous ones: "You Can't Get Away With It," "The House on 92nd Street," "Walk East on Beacon," and "The FBI Story." There were also the pulps: G-Man Detective Magazine, the feds and F.B.I. Detective magazines. As J. Edgar was changing himself from a cop and his bureau from a humdrum government office into

mythology it came to be less and less important that the FBI wasn't terribly good at catching crooks. In fact, Hoover was never enthusiastic about crook-catching; he resisted every effort from FDR's to Nixon's time to expand the FBI's responsibility and turn it into a national police force.

He understood that the real importance of the FBI was simply to be eternally present, perpetually engaged in the heroics of good winning over

evil, the unifying symbol of stability, family, flag and fair play.

Powers quotes him as once defining democracy as "the dictatorship of the collective conscience of the people." It was that conscience he was defending, not by arresting real malefactors, but being realer than real and bigger than big the only way that can be done . . . by ruling the imagination.

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Conscience

first one to document the man's invasion of popular mythology by melding himself and the bureau to fiction: By the early '30s there was already an FBI fiction show on radio, named G-Men. It began with an announcer saying, "Calling the Police! Calling the G-Men! Calling all Americans to War on the Underworld."

The next radio show was "The FBI in Peace and War", after which came "Top Secret of the FBI" and "I Was a Communist for the FBI," as well as "This Is Your FBI," which Hoover produced

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