

Guy Wright

What Hoover Wasn't

One way to measure J. Edgar Hoover is to consider what he might have been.

He might have been an American Heinrich Himmler, turning the FBI into an American Gestapo.

Or an American Lavrenti Beria, masterminding disappearances as the boss of an American NKVD.

The opportunity was there.

Hoover took charge of the fledgling FBI at a time when secret police were coming into fashion, as an adjunct of dictatorships.

It was a time, too, when Americans had less concern for the fine points of civil liberties than they now profess.

In a nation that had no experience with a national police force, Hoover could have molded the FBI along the same lines as those chosen by his contemporaries in Germany and Russia.

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AND ONCE the tool was forged, who can say it wouldn't have been used? In the past half century there have been several periods of hysteria that could have provided the excuse.

Hoover came on stage at the time of the Palmer Raids, named for A. Mitchell Palmer, an attorney general who epitomized the nation's first Red scare, just after World War I.

Scores of immigrant "anarchists" were rounded up and deported. Home-grown radicals were imprisoned with only perfunctory concern for due process.

Not many people were able to avoid the contagion of fear. Even the New York Times, today's unflappable liberal, joined the hue and cry.

"Radicalism Runs Mad," screamed a Times headline. And in an editorial it opined there was "no use in shutting our eyes to the facts . . . Bolshevik agitation has been extended among the Negroes."

Hoover was involved in that witchhunt of the '20s, but his approach was different.

While others flailed wildly, he set up a file of radical leaders in cities across the country, with the hope of distinguishing between the bomb throwers and the merely bombastic. Already he was the meticulous cop.

During the Depression of the '30s many of democracy's spokesmen lost faith and looked to Russia, Germany and Italy for a new example.

Reinhold Niebuhr said: "Capitalism is dying . . . it ought to die."

Will Rogers said: "Those rascals in Russia along with all their cuckoo stuff have got some mighty good ideas . . . Imagine a country where everybody goes to work."

Even Winston Churchill at one point expressed "doubt whether institutions based on adult suffrage could possibly arrive at the right decisions" and toyed with thoughts of "new institutions."

Many business leaders would have welcomed an American Mussolini to "make the trains run on time," and a fascist police force to keep the destitute docile.

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BUT THE FBI in the 1930s fought gangsters, not dispossessed farmers or men in breadlines.

The war surely offered an excuse for police state methods. But it was Earl Warren and others like him who demanded the mass internment of Japanese-Americans. Hoover opposed that hysterical injustice.

In the postwar years he was accused of a Communist witchhunt. But the spies convicted — and, even more, those who escaped to Russia — confirmed the fire behind the smoke.

In the '60s the taunts of the militants became self-refuting. In a real police state you don't heckle the fuzz.

A month or so ago Hoover sent me a thank-you note for something I had written about him. "I hope I can continue to merit your support," he said.

He did. All the way to the end.