

ON POLITICAL BOOKS

Hoover Damned

*Exposing the ultimate
G-man—and finding the
ultimate bureaucrat*

by Taylor Branch

Curt Gentry, best known as a writer for his coauthored account of the Charles Manson celebrity/cult murders, devoted 15 years' labor to take his place among the biographers of Hoover. His book is generally a pleasure to read. Its contributions to knowledge are many, especially for students of government, which is something of an irony considering Gentry has aimed his work more at popular melodrama. He has already signed with Francis Ford Coppola to turn the book into a cinematic mirror image of *The Godfather*.

It is no discredit to Gentry that the list of his fellow laborers is destined to grow no matter how this account is received. Hoover will remain arguably the most challenging and significant subject of American political biography of the twentieth century. Not only did the founding G-man span all eras between the Wobblies and Watergate, he also consistently shaped images that go deep into the national identity. Our reactions to the words "fingerprint" and "security" owe much to him, and even those who loathe Hoover cannot fully escape his influence on their perception of characters ranging from Al Capone and Martin Luther King to Joe McCarthy and Lee Harvey Oswald. Hoover's role was smoothly hidden or glaringly public, somewhat as blood beneath skin can remain invisible or stream vividly to the surface. It seems all the more remarkable that one who tapped so consistently into the emotional substructure of national history was not a president or a media giant but a bureaucrat. Certainly, no other bureaucrat eclipsed presidents in national popularity nor left behind such a passionately contested legend. This makes him the supreme oddity. But perhaps future scholars will find it perfectly

Taylor Branch, a contributing editor of The Washington Monthly, is at work on a sequel to his last book, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63.

J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets. Curt Gentry. Norton, \$29.95.

natural that Hoover's genius lay in the technobureaucratic world that makes his life, better than that of FDR or Reagan, distinguish our century from Abraham Lincoln's.

Middle-crass morality

In one respect, Gentry's portrait of Hoover is inferior to an earlier comprehensive biography by Richard Gid Powers (*Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover*). Powers fixes Hoover's early character in the values of turn-of-the-century Washington, a small town in which blue-collar families like that of Dickerson Hoover—a government platemaker, son of a government printer—looked to the federal bureaucracy as an oasis of prestige and respectability. To escape into the middle class from the mud of the nineteenth century, the Hoovers needed to absorb the self-conscious morality best exemplified by the high-church Sunday school and the marching Cadet Corps, where young Edgar excelled. As a minority struggling to gain ascendancy, the middle class considered itself mortally threatened by the drag of riff-raff below—the ex-slaves making their way up from the South, and even more so the millions of immigrants who did not speak English or go to a proper church. Protestant America took refuge in the temperance movement, the YMCA, and organizations celebrating Anglo lineage. In Washington, led by President Woodrow Wilson, it defended its turf by exclusion, vigorously segregating the civil service and social institutions by race, class, and culture. The disciplined virtues of the middle class became infused with a corrupting, compulsive need to define and seal off the alien others below. In his first job as a Justice Department clerk, J. Edgar Hoover threw himself into this crusade. Exuding scorn for the lazy plunder of the patronage bureaucrats around him, he outworked everybody in making lists of Russian-speaking immigrants, anarchists, pacifists, communists, and other deviants to be expunged from a decent America. Hoover's upbringing fit the times: He was born to lead a backlash of the upright.

The Powers biography is grounded in personal descriptions of young Hoover the Sunday school teacher, vaulting his way into the starchiest Presbyterian preserves, whereas Gentry introduces a more generic Victorian bureaucrat. The two versions meet in the tale that established Hoover's prominence: the "Red" round-ups of 1919 and 1920. Hoover gathered index cards on 150,000 undesirables within months of landing a supervisor's job in Justice's subversion office in 1919—450,000 by 1921. He personally orchestrated the massive federal arrests of as many as 3,000 on a single night and put 250 aliens, among them Emma

Goldman, on a rusty deportation ship headed the wrong way past the Statue of Liberty. Through it all, Gentry notes, Hoover did more than chafe against the due process rights of the defendants—he maneuvered to circumvent or remove almost any test of evidence. To him, what mattered was not so much what the deportees had done, or even what they might do, but who they were. He agreed with his boss, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who expressed shock that anyone in Congress could be interested in the word of "these ignorant aliens" as against that of "these splendid men, these real Americans" in Hoover's department.

And yet, when Congress disgraced Palmer for his unconstitutional excesses, Hoover adroitly switched. He got his job as the first FBI director by fervently supporting the public announcement of Attorney General Harlan Stone: "There is always the possibility that a secret police may become a menace to free governments and free institutions. . . . The Bureau of Investigation is not concerned with political or other opinions of individuals. It is concerned only with their conduct and then only with such conduct as is forbidden by the laws of the United States." For more than a decade of efficient criminal work, Hoover kept his promise to run a constitutional FBI, holding his political proclivities in check. Throughout the formative Palmer episode, he exhibited nearly all the traits that would mark his long career: his revulsion against foreign "elements" more than acts of crime per se, his tendency to toady upward and tyrannize downward, his patience under stress, and his uncanny fix on the status fears of "middle America" some 50 years before his protege in this regard, Richard Nixon.

The bionic bureau

Hoover used the trial period in the twenties to mold the FBI into a machine. "The key to most of Hoover's changes was standardization," writes Gentry. He became a fanatic at a unique intersection of science and culture, demanding uniform precision not only in the banker's dress of his agents but also in the language, coding, and routing of FBI files. A pioneer in systems management, he wanted interchangeable agents to work in interchangeable offices through a massively cross-indexed information network, and even into his senile years Hoover was noted for sharp rebukes on points of procedure that might appear trivial to anyone else. No other government outfit, including the Army, achieved such regimentation, the result being that the bureau took after the military in its sense of humor as well as in its finest moments of frenzied, far-flung investigative assault.

The reformed FBI was ponderous and slavish to Hoover's most ludicrous whims, but its discipline had earned a permanent reservoir of deserved support before the Depression offered two opportunities to build from that base. First, according to Gentry, the gangster era allowed Hoover to promote the FBI as the first line of defense for the American way of life itself—claiming a role far grander than auxiliary crime- or fire-fighters. Gentry is correct to call the term Public Enemy Number One, coined by Hoover on June 22, 1934, for the John Dillinger case, a “stroke of public relations genius.” Hoover played the gimmick for all it was worth, promoting himself as the personification of law enforcement through news releases and gangster films that changed the face of Hollywood. A second and even more important opening came on August 24, 1936, when FDR bestowed upon the FBI a mandate to investigate Nazi sympathizers, communist fellow travelers, America Firsters, and anybody else who might oppose the administration in the event of war. In short, Roosevelt put the FBI back into politics—permanently, this time—which was just what the director preferred. Never again did Hoover think of himself as bogged down in mundane criminal work. Crime came to play only a minor role in the bureau's mission as an intelligence outfit charged with nothing less than defining, detecting, controlling, and weeding out defective Americans.

As a self-assured pragmatist, Roosevelt valued Hoover's gossip and derring-do far more than he worried about their constitutional implications. Gentry shows Roosevelt to have been unperturbed even by FBI bugs aimed at his own wife. When Hoover disputed Mrs. Roosevelt's protests against his “Gestapo methods,” the president is said to have amiably replied, “Well, Edgar, don't get excited. Just think about me. I have to live with her.” When Hoover's files supported a campaign to fire the under secretary of state, Sumner Welles, for homosexual promiscuity, FDR said of his friend, “Well, he's not doing it on government time, is he?”

Hoover took advantage of Roosevelt's relaxed attitudes to create his own FBI rules for public relations and intelligence work, as Gentry details in the seminal case of the Nazi saboteurs. When a team of eight Nazis debarked on Long Island from a submarine on June 13, 1942, two of them made their way straight to FBI headquarters to turn themselves in as U.S. admirers. Referred to the bureau's “nut desk,”

they were rebuffed—“Yesterday, Napoleon called”—until they finally dumped a suitcase full of spy equipment and \$84,000 in cash onto the desk of an assistant director. With directions from the defectors, the FBI caught their six confederates, who were promptly executed, while the two defectors themselves were hidden away in prison to protect the FBI's skewed version of the case: “FBI Captures Eight German Agents.” Not surprisingly, the bureau

suppressed the confessions of the two defectors, along with their determined initiative, on the theory that to admit anything easy, human, or haphazard about the case would diminish the public image of an omniscient FBI on guard against the Germans. Going beyond external propaganda, however,

Hoover also falsified the case *within* the U.S. government, telling even Roosevelt that the bureau captured first the six fugitives and then the two strays without the benefit of any inside information.

Internal deceit was a bureaucratic tool that Hoover used to protect his political prerogatives against rivals who were far too hardened to buy his sentimental posturings. Hoover the dissembler was most often Hoover the bureaucrat rather than the bigot or boob, and Gentry is at his most perceptive in picking up the bureaucratic intrigues behind some of Hoover's most spectacular campaigns. He notes, for instance, that half the victims in the fabled Helen Bentley spy cases were connected to the OSS—thus tarnishing “Wild Bill” Donovan, Hoover's bitterest enemy and chief obstacle to his dream of controlling all U.S. intelligence, foreign and domestic. Other Bentley victims were from the Treasury Department, which Hoover had hated since Charles Lindbergh gave credit to treasury agents (truthfully) instead of the bureau for cracking his kidnapping case. Similarly, at least part of the Alger Hiss case grew out of Hoover's wars against the State Department for control of loyalty investigations, which still today supply much of the FBI manpower, as well as the choicest political gossip gleaned from questioning the neighbors, lovers, and grade-school teachers of any potential federal employee of note. The celebrated vendetta against Martin Luther King is explained not by Hoover's racial views so much as his struggle with Robert Kennedy over the FBI's political agenda. After the assassination of President Kennedy, Gentry notes, Hoover assigned the investigation of Jack Ruby to the civil rights unit solely because the organized

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crime unit was headed by a protege of Robert Kennedy—a bureaucratic move that left the Ruby case in the hands of utterly unprepared officials. Gentry makes a convincing argument that no FBI action—toward the Japanese internment of World War II, the execution of the Rosenbergs, the Huston Plan under Nixon, or anything else—can be explained without reference to Hoover’s increasingly complex bureaucratic battle status.

Focus on Hoover’s battles within the government inevitably leads to the sexiest political material: the bugs, taps, tapes, and other means of political leverage in the legendary radioactive files. The political Hoover is fighting most often inside the government, against kindred spirits such as House Un-American Activities Committee Chairman Martin Dies. By and large, Gentry is too sophisticated to call Hoover a blackmailer, knowing that Hoover needed only to neutralize opponents by coming privately to them as an obedient servant with confidential news of their crimes and embarrassments. Still, Gentry does believe that the sleaze blinds as well as corrupts, and in seeking to document his cover jacket quotation from Hoover—“There is something addicting about a secret”—Gentry gets addicted himself. Sinking into the ooze of the underworld, he comes to accept more on rumor and demands to be taken on his word rather than on evidence that can be examined. He presents Tom Clark as a bought man on the indirect testimony of an unctuous lobbyist named Winterberger. He portrays Senator Joe McCarthy as not only a crook and a homosexual but as a molester of young girls on the basis of “headquarters gossip” and two anonymous affidavits. Even worse, he describes with no sourcing at all how Hoover allegedly stopped one unfavorable magazine profile of himself by sending out “photographs of the publisher’s wife engaged in fellatio with her black chauffeur while parked in Rock Creek Park.” In these passages, Gentry ceases to be a convincing author. Instead he has become the worst he sees in Hoover.

Covert cooperation

Addiction saps discipline and distorts proportion. Hoover’s political dirt is fascinating, but preoccupation with it sucks writer and reader alike away from larger realities. Among the events utterly lost in Gentry’s account are the thousands of criminal investigations actually brought to fruition. As Hoover’s career dragged on, how did such work fare in proportion to the bugs, COINTELPROs, and political background checks of the later years? If the statutory work of the FBI continued in good order, in spite of the political corruption, could it have done so without Hoover’s

dictatorial control and his Maoist leadership psychology? Gentry cannot address such questions, because the more legitimate aspects of the FBI’s work came to interest him as little as they did Hoover.

Another issue lost in the dirt is that of the responsibility of American citizens. In a sense, Hoover’s political character is easily explained: Madison and Hamilton described him perfectly in *The Federalist Papers*. The basic structure of American democracy is predicated on the assumption that people in power will seek to become less accountable—that they will become more arbitrary, more resentful of criticism, that they will shy away from courtrooms, where their evidence can be contradicted, and instead retreat into secrecy and other classified forums in which they can claim the unchecked authority of kings. Hoover can offer natural, Madisonian reasons for succumbing to tyrannical impulses, but what is our excuse for letting him get away with it? Gentry shows that some people perceived Hoover clearly almost from the beginning. “Despite all this burlesque and bombast,” observed a writer in 1933, “there is a serious and sinister side to this secret federal policy system. It had always been up to its neck in personal intrigue and partisan politics. . . . More inaccessible than presidents, [Hoover] kept his agents in fear and awe by firing and shifting them at whim. . . . The director’s appetite for publicity is the talk of the capital. . . .” Thirty years later, through the sophisticated sixties until Hoover’s death in 1972, only the rarest of journalists even discussed Hoover in public, and some of those did not see the fundamental questions involved, wishing only to substitute a good tyrant for a bad one. What happened? Had we become dumber? Less democratic? More cowed?

With Hoover safely dead, we cannot reach these questions by substituting a cartoon of evil for the legend of the heroic G-man. The director was very close to the main tides of American politics into the superpower era. We are drifting on them still. Efforts to understand Hoover or those tides will be indebted to Gentry’s contribution in these pages. □

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POLITICAL BOOKNOTES

Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby. Stephen L. Carter. *Basic Books*, \$23. Shortly after Harvard Law School rejected him, Stephen Carter got a rush of calls from Harvard professors. His record was so good they had assumed he was white, they explained, and so had passed over him. But now they had learned he was black. Wouldn't he like to come after all?

Such is the saga of a whole generation: African-Americans who, having gained admission under special preference programs, pioneered the integration of predominantly white institutions in the sixties and seventies. In the debate over affirmative action currently rocking America, with one side decrying the policy as discriminatory against whites and the other defending it as the least that can be done for America's oppressed minorities, little has been heard from the beneficiaries. Carter, a noted constitutional scholar and Yale Law School professor, is as successful a representative of those beneficiaries as they come, and he tells their story well.

Reflections is a collection and an analysis of Carter's experiences as a student competing at mostly white schools: Ithaca High, Stanford, and Yale Law. It is laced with the kinds of stories of stereotyping that make African-Americans seethe with anger. "The smartest students of color were not considered as capable as the smartest white students," he writes, and "therefore would not be allowed to compete with them." The syndrome haunted him—and other African-Americans—into professional life.

The author laments that he could never be viewed as anything better than the best black. That lament is shared widely among African-American professionals, and it leads in turn to the ultimate question: Are affirmative action programs really worth it from the beneficiary's point of view, or are minorities better off fending for themselves? The dilemma hangs over Carter's whole narrative, and his views about it are wildly

mixed. On the one hand, he argues, racial preferences force blacks into boxes they cannot escape. On the other, that is a small price to pay for trying to combat the enormous problems facing black America.

At times, Carter's handwringing seems excessive. It has all the charm—and some of the inanity—of an ivory tower seminar. What makes his internal

debate worthwhile, however, is that a lot of lives have turned—and will continue to turn—on affirmative action programs. After all, without affirmative action, Carter acknowledges, he would not have gained admission to Yale, and he finally comes out in favor of some system of preferences, at least at the undergraduate level. "It is true that the result of racial preferences is some-

Votes for Hostages?

As Reagan's campaign manager, William Casey may have infused political strategy with his cloak-and-dagger methods. This fully balanced biography of one of Washington's most intriguing figures focuses on Casey's role in the Iran-Contra affair, including the controversial Woodward interview, and defines his place in history as the man who made—and unmade—Reagan's foreign policy.

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—*The New York Times Book Review*

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—Daniel Schorr, *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*

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