

Book Reviews

THE BOSS: J. EDGAR HOOVER AND THE GREAT AMERICAN INQUISITION. By Athan G. Theoharis¹ and John Stuart Cox.² Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press. 1988. Pp. 489. \$27.95.

THE PARTY OF FEAR: FROM NATIVIST MOVEMENTS TO THE NEW RIGHT IN AMERICAN HISTORY. By David H. Bennett.³ Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press. 1988. Pp. 508. \$29.95.

KELLEY: THE STORY OF AN FBI DIRECTOR. By Clarence M. Kelley⁴ and James Kirkpatrick Davis.⁵ Kansas City, Kan.: Andrews, McMeel & Parker. 1987. Pp. 326. \$17.95.

DONNIE BRASCO: MY UNDERCOVER LIFE IN THE MAFIA. By Joseph D. Pistone⁶ with Richard Woodley.⁷ New York, N.Y.: New American Library. 1987. Pp. 373. \$18.95.

SPY VS. SPY: STALKING SOVIET SPIES IN AMERICA. By Ronald Kessler.⁸ New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1988. Pp. 308. \$19.95.

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THE SPY WHO GOT AWAY: THE INSIDE STORY OF EDWARD LEE HOWARD, THE CIA AGENT WHO BETRAYED HIS COUNTRY'S SECRETS AND ESCAPED TO MOSCOW. By David Wise.⁹ New York, N.Y.: Random House. Pp. 288. \$18.95.

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The Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1989 is generally presumed to bear relatively little resemblance to the FBI as it existed in May of 1972 when J. Edgar Hoover, the Bureau's director since 1924, died suddenly at the age of seventy-seven. The panoply of investigative horror stories that began with revelations about the dirty tricks escapades of "COINTELPRO," then expanded during Watergate and finally culminated during the 1975-1976 Senate hearings of the Church Committee gradually gave way to the image of an ostensibly better managed and less political FBI whose recovery was symbolized by the apparently successful directorship of former federal appellate judge William H. Webster.

In the last year or so, however, those roseate assumptions have been cast into greater doubt than at any time in more than a decade as three contemporary stories that seem like total throwbacks to the Hoover-era FBI have unfolded in the public press: first, the embarrassing tale of the Bureau's admittedly over broad and at times ham-handed investigation of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES); second, the stunningly racist harassment that one black Bureau agent, Donald Rochon, apparently experienced at the hands of his erstwhile FBI colleagues in the Omaha and Chicago field offices; and, third, a U.S. District Court verdict finding the FBI guilty of widespread racial discrimination in employment practices against its own Hispanic Special Agents.

These recent embarrassments ought not to come as such a surprise. The internal world of the FBI has changed a good deal less over the past fifteen years than many people assume. External oversight of Bureau investigations by Justice Department lawyers and congressional Intelligence Committees, much-heralded a decade ago as an all-purpose guarantee against Hoover-style political excesses, has hardly any effect on the workaday world of field agents'

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pursuit of cases. Similarly, the much-vaunted racial and sexual integration of the Bureau's agent corps has counted for relatively little when a narrowly conservative political homogeneity—not surprising in any law enforcement agency—has survived largely intact despite the death or retirement of virtually all the Hoover-era supervisors. Additionally, while agents remain, in personnel policy and civil service terms, virtually protectionless in the face of an almost quasi-military command structure that tolerates no dissent and rewards twenty years of quiet obeisance with an attractive pension, audible internal complaints are likely to remain very rare. The recent experience of nineteen-year FBI veteran John C. “Jack” Ryan, a Peoria (yes, Peoria), Illinois agent who protested instructions to investigate nonviolent opponents of Reagan Administration Central America policies and found himself quickly dismissed just months short of qualifying for his pension, is as instructive about the reality of the present-day Bureau as it is reminiscent of agents during the Hoover years who were abruptly terminated for criticizing FBI policies during night-school college classes.

Richard Powers's *Secrecy and Power* (1987), already widely-praised by journalistic¹¹ and academic reviewers,¹² is as solid and sensitive a biography of Director Hoover as we are likely to have for quite some time. Powers rightfully emphasizes how Hoover attained the stature and popularity that he did largely because he was, in the years between 1935 and the early 1960s, both a genuinely representative American whose values and biases reflected those of the wider society and a presidentially-appointed administrator who willingly curried favor with successive occupants of the White House while simultaneously appreciating that a high media profile as a defender of embattled American virtues could effectively insulate him from any unwanted control by his ostensible superiors.

Athan Theoharis and John Cox's *The Boss* (1988), while less interpretively sensitive and thematically integrated than *Secrecy and Power*, nonetheless makes many of the same points about Hoover's life and directorship. While Powers stresses the centrality of Hoover's “turn-of-the-century vision of America as a small community of like-minded neighbors,” Theoharis and Cox make a more explicit

11. Marro, *Child of Darkness*, THE NATION, Mar. 21, 1987, at 365-68; Miller, *A Flawed Law-And-Order Hero* (Book Review), NEWSWEEK, Feb. 16, 1987, at 74; N.Y. Times, Mar. 3, 1987, at C15, col. 1; Wash. Post, Feb. 15, 1987, Book World, at 1-2.

12. Goldstein, *Czar*, THE PROGRESSIVE, Aug. 1987, at 29-30; Garrow, *Hoover's F.B.I.*, DISSENT, Summer 1987, at 395; Oshinsky, *Bulldog of the Bureau*, THE NEW LEADER, May 4-18, 1987, at 13; Brinkley, *Dreams of a G-Man*, N.Y. REV. OF BOOKS, Apr. 23, 1987, at 15; Klehr, Book Review, THE AMER. SPECTATOR, Mar. 1987, at 44; N.Y. Times, Mar. 8, 1987, § 7 (Book Review), at 1, 36-37.

link between Hoover's individual narrowness and nativist beliefs that have a long and undulating tradition in American history. "His parochialism was to a degree America's parochialism," they write, and "his xenophobia reflected America's xenophobia."

The resonance of that interpretive congruence between these two Hoover biographies is greatly increased by David Bennett's valuable but somewhat oddly-titled *The Party of Fear* (1988), a survey of nativistic political movements across all of American history. Unfortunately, Bennett does not undertake to relate Hoover and the Bureau to this influential political and cultural tradition, and in general he offers a better developed portrait of nineteenth century events than of the twentieth century. He nicely distinguishes how American xenophobia has at different times featured different admixtures of hostility towards alien or foreign *people* and alien or foreign *ideas*, and he too, like the Hoover biographers, argues that a desire to protect an idealized notion of community and traditional values underlay the recurrent nativistic, anti-foreign behavior.

This interpretation can be traced to Richard Hofstadter's landmark 1964 essay on *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter's analysis was applied to Hoover and the Bureau in Frank Donner's invaluable rich—and now out of print—*The Age of Surveillance* (1980). Theoharis and Bennett could have benefitted from more consideration of Hofstadter's and especially Donner's analyses; even so, both books offer a generally clear-eyed understanding of an American political tradition that is often under-appreciated by historians.

Powers stressed FDR's responsibility for "removing all effective restraints from Hoover's surveillance of the American political scene." Theoharis and Cox, who weigh the Roosevelt-Hoover alliance somewhat more lightly than Powers, emphasize instead the special relationship that the director established with Lyndon Johnson, for whom the FBI became "the domestic intelligence arm of the Johnson White House."

The Boss, like *Secrecy and Power*, demonstrates convincingly that the politically-motivated excesses of the Hoover-era FBI were most often *not* the actions of a self-starting, self-serving political police—what Senator Church in a now-classic phrase characterized as a "rogue elephant" agency—but occurred with the active connivance or at least passive endorsement of its political superiors. Such a realization may disappoint those who would rather view the embarrassing excesses of American intelligence agencies in the post-World War II era as the doings of unrepresentative and almost con-

spiratorially secret agency executives, but the truth is more painful—and more sobering—than that.

While the broad outlines of Hoover's public life were rarely secret, few meaningful details about his personal life have ever made it on to the public record. No recent biography breaks any remarkably new ground on this subject, although *Secrecy and Power* does provide an informative portrait of Hoover's childhood milieu while *The Boss* makes excellent use of interviews with three surviving relatives in painting a generally distressful picture of Hoover's early family life. Unfortunately, however, no biographer or other student of the FBI ever had access to the two most important (and now deceased) people in Hoover's adult life, long-time Associate Director and close companion Clyde Tolson and life-long personal secretary Helen W. Gandy. Theoharis and Cox do make passing use of an interview with former Deputy Associate Director Cartha D. "Deke" DeLoach, Hoover's liaison with Lyndon Johnson, who almost startlingly allows that Hoover "was an insecure individual and that caused him to be harsh to personnel." In general, however, oral history is unlikely ever to play a substantial role in FBI historiography. Most Hoover intimates and deputies—T. Frank Baughman, Guy Hottel, Louis B. Nichols, Luther V. Boardman, Alan H. Belmont, and Al Rosen—have either never been interviewed or died before anyone tried. Ovid Demaris's 1975 volume, *The Director: An Oral Biography of J. Edgar Hoover*, which made verbatim use of conversations with important 1960s era FBI executives John P. Mohr, William C. Sullivan, and W. Mark Felt, as well as with Hoover's longtime black chauffeur, James E. Crawford, still remains the state of the art work in that regard.

Theoharis and Cox argue with some tenacity for what they contend was "the extraordinary poverty of [Hoover's] personal life," but they also dabble far less persuasively with an argument that Hoover's political animuses were all rooted in externalizing and projecting on to others the fears and impulses that troubled him subconsciously. Like Powers, they deal straightforwardly with the long-rumored and never-documented notion that Hoover was a homosexual whose long friendship with Tolson had a sexual component. Both books conclude fairly and accurately that there is no evidence that Hoover ever had a sexual relationship with Tolson or with anyone else. Theoharis and Cox, however, risk a misstep in remarking that "the strange likelihood is that Hoover never knew sexual desire at all," for while it is likely that the director was celibate, the raft of tales from Hoover-era FBI headquarters veterans concerning the director's voracious desire for reports, photographs,

and recordings of all manner of things sexual are too persuasive to be wholly apocryphal. Indeed, the best beginning of an explanation of Hoover's all-encompassing voyeurism lies neither in *The Boss* nor in *Secrecy and Power* but in *The Party of Fear*, where Bennett writes persuasively about how nineteenth century anti-Catholicism regularly featured "a peculiar fascination with a pornographic literature" depicting priests' and nuns' excesses that was "legitimized only because it damned the sexual activity it described in such detail." To anyone who has heard retired supervisors' stories of Hoover, the director's unceasing eagerness to itemize and denounce all manner of non-marital, non-missionary sex seems likely to have been a fairly common type of voyeurism.

Both Hoover biographies eschew any effort to offer a comprehensive history of the FBI, and in that context they are both less complete, especially with regard to the FBI of the early 1970s, than Sanford J. Ungar's incomparable *FBI* (1976), a weighty tome which owed much of its value, if not its simple existence, to the cooperation of Hoover's first congressionally-confirmed successor, Clarence M. Kelley. Director Kelley's own memoir is less valuable with regard to his own five years (1973-1978) in the top chair than with regard to his earlier twenty-one years (1940-1961) as a field agent and mid-level supervisor. Relatively little of what has been written about the FBI devotes much time to treating the serious, long-standing and still-powerful differences that separate most field agents and field offices from the preferences and predilections of FBI headquarters, but Kelley's little-noted volume offers an excellent and easily-readable picture of what life was like for the typical Hoover-era agent. Kelley's descriptions of his own incidental dealings and occasional audiences with Hoover portray the stilted, unpredictable nature of one-on-one contact with the director far more graphically than anything offered by the more distant biographers.

While Kelley's memoir is more satisfying than earlier ones by other FBI veterans such as Sullivan,¹³ Felt,¹⁴ and Neil J. Welch,¹⁵ Kelley's directorship ended more than a decade ago, and hence his book too concerns the FBI of the past. In recent months a growing handful of books touching on one or another aspect of the present-day FBI have appeared, but without exception they shed no light on the issues and questions raised by the stories regarding CISPES, Agent Rochon, the Hispanic agents' discrimination suit, and Agent

13. W. SULLIVAN & B. BROWN, *THE BUREAU: MY THIRTY YEARS IN HOOVER'S FBI* (1979).

14. W. FELT, *THE FBI PYRAMID: FROM THE INSIDE* (1979).

15. N. WELCH & D. MARSTON, *INSIDE HOOVER'S FBI: THE TOP FIELD CHIEF REPORTS* (1984).

Ryan. One, by former agent Joseph D. Pistone, recounts his high-risk, six-year undercover infiltration of the Mafia and the very real death threats that followed his re-emergence and testimony in some of the government's most successful RICO prosecutions of organized crime.¹⁶ Several other volumes, all by journalists with solid track records, trace a succession of recent espionage cases. Indeed, in the least scintillating of these books, *Spy vs. Spy*, former *Washington Post* reporter Ronald Kessler explicitly voices the recent conventional wisdom that "today's FBI is quite different from the one J. Edgar Hoover headed."

Kessler, who is the only one of the spy book authors who received any extensive official cooperation from Bureau or other intelligence agency supervisors, goes out of his way to portray the Webster-era FBI as highly professional, a view that is undercut if not wholly rebutted by the many well-reported stories of the last year detailing the Bureau's missteps in the CISPES and Rochon situations. Too often Kessler's descriptions of the counter-espionage efforts of the Washington field office agents to whom he was given access come across as merely well-intentioned cheerleading.

In perhaps the most widely publicized of the recent onslaught of espionage cases, the FBI's initial discovery of the John Walker family naval spy ring was delayed and almost totally thwarted by Bureau agents' initial dismissal of Walker's ex-wife's reports of his spying without any meaningful investigation.¹⁷ While the FBI came exceptionally close to missing the entire Walker spy ring even after clear evidence of it was placed in their lap, the Bureau suffered a far worse and inestimably more damaging embarrassment in the case of turncoat former CIA agent Edward Lee Howard, whose arresting saga is beautifully told by long-time intelligence journalist David Wise in *The Spy Who Got Away*.

Howard, a one-time Peace Corps volunteer and AID officer in South America, was hired in 1981 by the CIA and trained for assignment to the Agency's ultra-crucial Moscow station, with full instruction in all of the super-sensitive techniques used for both human and electronic "assets." Then, however, just before his actual posting to Moscow, Howard flunked a series of polygraph tests concerning drug usage and petty theft. In May of 1983 Howard was abruptly forced to resign, with the Agency having given little if any thought to the potential danger that so well-briefed an embitt-

16. See also R. BLUMENTHAL, *LAST DAYS OF THE SICILIANS: AT WAR WITH THE MAFIA—THE FBI ASSAULT ON THE PIZZA CONNECTION* (1988).

17. See H. BLUM, *I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE . . . THE TRUE STORY OF THE WALKERS: AN AMERICAN SPY FAMILY* (1987).

tered ex-spy could represent. Two years later a KGB defector informed the Agency that an American ex-operative had told the Soviets all there was to know about the CIA's Moscow operations. Knowing that Howard was the culprit, but lacking any evidence on which to arrest him, the FBI, at the Agency's behest, placed Howard under surveillance and, several weeks later, confronted him with the news that he had been fingered by a defector.

Two days later, making full use of the antidetection tricks he had been taught by the CIA, Howard evaded the FBI's supposedly total but actually sloppy surveillance and vanished. He was well out of the United States before the Bureau realized that he had even left home. Eleven months later the Soviet Union formally announced that Howard had been granted political asylum and was living in Moscow.

Wise calls Howard's escape perhaps "the most embarrassing episode in the history of the Bureau's counterespionage operations," and the bungled surveillance is a story that all but totally undercuts the present-day conventional wisdom about what Kessler naively calls the "highly professional, sophisticated" FBI.

Those who presume that the Webster-era FBI became a substantially transformed and significantly more able police bureaucracy than what existed at the end of Hoover's reign ought to ponder carefully the accumulating evidence of these past two years. Simple competence does not appear to be American counterintelligence's strong suit. Ham-handed over-investigation of essentially harmless political dissenters such as CISPES appears as ideologically misguided as it is wasteful. The internal, racially focused harassment of Agent Rochon seems to have gone far, far beyond the sort of office hijinks that some Bureau supervisors initially sought to dismiss it as. The FBI's loss of the Hispanic agents' discrimination suit provides a formally-adjudicated verdict that systemic—and not just idiosyncratic—problems are widespread. The dismissal of Agent Ryan for conscientiously dissenting from the Bureau's still-powerful conservative political consensus shows that some other Hoover-era values remain strong as well. The more the FBI seems to change, the more it may really remain the same.