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What Hoover Knew

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J. EDGAR HOOVER: The Man and the Secrets, by Curt Gentry. Norton, 846 pp., \$ 29.95.

FROM THE SECRET FILES OF J. EDGAR HOOVER, edited by Athan Theoharis. Ivan R. Dee, 370 pp., \$ 26.50.

PERHAPS the single most striking fact about J. Edgar Hoover is how long he served as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation: 48 years. Named to the post in 1924 at the age of 29, when Calvin Coolidge was president of the United States, J. Edgar Hoover retained his position throughout the administrations of Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon - a tremendous sweep of American history. Only his death in office in 1972 at the age of 77 removed J. Edgar Hoover from what had become one of the pinnacle positions of American political power.

When Hoover first became director the job hardly seemed a potentially powerful post. Few crimes were federal rather than state responsibilities (principally interstate auto theft and the transportation of women for "immoral" purposes), and reformist Attorney General Harlan Fiske Stone had prohibited the ideological and political hi-jinks that had dominated the Justice Department in the World War I era. Even as late as 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt became president, Hoover had only a modest total of 391 agents scattered across the United States.

But two things soon tremendously enlarged the role of the FBI in American political life. First, the seemingly national crime wave of the mid-1930s, highlighted by the Lindbergh kidnapping and by celebrity hoodlums such as "Ma" Barker and John Dillinger, quickly produced a celebration of law enforcement (what one writer has called "the cult of the detective hero") that was best exemplified by James Cagney's film "G-Men." Thanks to Hollywood and to high-profile journalists such as Walter Winchell, Hoover and his agents were transformed from obscure bureaucrats into widely heralded protectors of American values and safety.

Second, Franklin Roosevelt understood and welcomed the political advantages that a savvy, responsive intelligence agency could provide to a chief executive and quickly formed a mutually beneficial partnership with Hoover. From that time forward, except for some tensions with Harry Truman, Hoover's FBI usually functioned as a loyal political intelligence arm for whomever was the incumbent in the White House.

The FBI's public popularity and its director's careful stroking of successive presidents were the two principal pillars of Hoover's power right up until his death. Any number of crude docudramas and melodramatic novels envision Hoover ham-handedly blackmailing a succession of presidents with recordings of illicit sex or evidence of financial misdeeds so as to retain his post, but the reality was far more subtle. As Curt Gentry rightly puts it, "The fear of what J. Edgar Hoover knew was often as potent, and effective, as anything that was actually in his files."

Gentry's huge and often well-written biography of Hoover is, however, hugely disappointing. Little if any information in it is new to the public record, and it will not seriously threaten the primacy of Richard Gid Powers' "Secrecy and Power" (1987) as the best interpretive study of Hoover. Gentry's narrative does offer an excellent portrait of how badly Hoover's directorship deteriorated after the 1960s as Hoover himself aged and as his close companion and deputy, Clyde Tolson, became increasingly infirm, but in almost all other particulars "J. Edgar Hoover" is little more than an entertaining rehash of a now-familiar story.

Since the early 1970s, thanks both to congressional probes of Hoover-era excesses and to files released pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act, journalists and historians have developed a detailed understanding of Hoover's FBI, handicapped only by the general reluctance of many former agents (some of whom became defendants in civil damage suits filed by one-time FBI political targets) to talk about their work. Gentry's book is occasionally strengthened by 1975-76 interviews he conducted with now-deceased former FBI executives such as William C. Sullivan and Alan H. Belmont, but the only two people who were in any way truly close to Hoover - Tolson and the director's long-time personal secretary Helen W. Gandy - both died without talking to any biographer.

Marquette University historian Athan Theoharis (himself a co-author of a 1988 Hoover biography) knows as much about Hoover's FBI as any non-agent, and his persistent use of the Freedom of Information Act to obtain reams of once-secret Hoover memos has been a valuable pursuit. "From the Secret Files" will no doubt intrigue a reader who wants to know the day-by-day details of how the FBI recorded the 1942 bedroom intimacies of Navy Ensign John F. Kennedy and Washington journalist Inga Arvad, or why Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson merited inclusion in the Bureau's "Sex Deviate" index because of his widely rumored homosexuality, but most of the remainder of Theoharis' present volume - such as page after page of admittedly important memos about the evolution of FBI electronic surveillance practices - will keep only insomniacs awake.

Gentry and Theoharis represent opposite ends of a spectrum. Eminently readable, "J. Edgar Hoover" is nonetheless sometimes quite undependable, as when Gentry confuses Martin Luther King Jr.'s SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) with the SRC (Southern Regional Council), a group of white moderates, or when he has Hoover single-handedly creating McCarthyism or nominating the late Potter Stewart to the U.S. Supreme Court. Additionally, there are extremely serious lapses such as carelessly labeling an aging black journalist as an FBI "informant" - signifying an ongoing and often financial relationship - rather than as simply a naive source.

Theoharis' selected memos, on the other hand, are quite precise and dependable, and occasionally truly fascinating, as when he reveals that the FBI in 1977 destroyed 300,000 pages of Hoover-era files dealing with homosexuality. But Theoharis' collection is haphazardly organized at best, and will be of far more use to professional scholars than to interested readers.

Neither "J. Edgar Hoover" nor "From the Secret Files" are volumes of any enduring significance. Hoover's remarkable longevity and his prurient files guarantee an ongoing parade of biographies, yet only a significant strengthening of the Freedom of Information Act - such as an amendment drastically restricting what can be withheld or deleted from FBI documents that are more than 40 years old - will ever dramatically add to what we presently know about J. Edgar Hoover's 48 years as chief of America's political police. Until such a reform takes place, recent events make it likely that enterprising journalists will gain access to old files of the KGB long before they fully see the old files of J. Edgar Hoover.

Illustration by Jack Sherman- J. Edgar Hoover holding all his 'hot' secret files close to his chest