

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Roundtable Review 16-7

Beverly Gage. *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century*. Viking Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780670025374.

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 Introduction by Melissa Graves, The Citadel
 

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In her seminal biography of J. Edgar Hoover, historian Beverly Gage writes, “to look at [Hoover] is also to look at ourselves, at what Americans valued and fought over during those years, what we tolerated and what we refused to see” (xxi). This is the crux of her argument, for which she weaves a magnificent volume of historical evidence. Over 837 pages, Gage demonstrates that Hoover achieved great political power at the behest of presidents and a Congress who authorized, encouraged, and depended upon the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s efforts to advance their own political agendas. Embedded into Hoover’s work as director for nearly half a century are the thumbprints of political leaders who spearheaded America’s rise as a global hegemon throughout the twentieth century, their prowess buoyed by the FBI’s enforcement of federal law.

Biographies about noteworthy political figures reflect the current state of the relevant historical field. Thus, biographies of Hoover serve as a meter stick for the field of US history. Prior to Gage’s work, four major biographies about Hoover explored his life and the ramifications of his power. These biographies, which were written after Hoover’s death in 1972, cast the director in a primarily negative light. Throughout his long career, Hoover commissioned or approved much of the work written about him; thus, these four postmortem biographies inserted a crucial dimension into the conversation about the FBI by using the Bureau’s archival material to look critically at Hoover. Richard Gid Powers’s *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover*,<sup>1</sup> written in 1987, depicted Hoover as a living relic of the past. Powers argued that towards the end of his life, Hoover shuffled out of sync with rapidly changing social norms of the 1960s and 1970s, and his insistence on maintaining the small-town America of his imagination was the guiding force for later catastrophes such as COINTELPRO, the FBI’s counterintelligence program aimed at subverting political movements which Hoover deemed threatening to the American way of life. Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox’s *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition*,<sup>2</sup> which was written in 1988, twelve years after the revelations of the Senate Church Committee’s examination into the Bureau’s deepest indiscretions, summarized the detrimental impact of Hoover’s life on American civil liberties, concluding that “Hoover had more to do with undermining American constitutional guarantees than any political leader before or since.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the authors argued that Hoover’s basest indiscretions reflected the United States’ shortcomings. In a 1989 book review, historian David Garrow summarized the crux of Theoharis and Cox’s argument, writing, “[they] make a more explicit 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.’”<sup>4</sup> Curt Gentry’s 1991 biography, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets*<sup>5</sup> proffered nearly 800

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (Free Press of Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox, *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition* (Temple University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Theoharis and Stuart Cox, *The Boss* 17.

<sup>4</sup> David Garrow, “Book Review: The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and The Great American Inquisition. By Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox,” *Constitutional Commentary* 6:115 (1989): 117-118.

<sup>5</sup> Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (Norton, 1991).

pages of vibrant anecdotes about Hoover, his inner Bureau circle, and the presidents to whom he reported, with little in the way of any broader social or historical context. Anthony Summer's 1993 *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*<sup>6</sup> grappled with decades of rumors regarding Hoover's sexuality, elevating the uncorroborated hearsay of socialites to the same level of credence as government records.

Prior to the release of Gage's work, nearly thirty years had passed without a new biography of Hoover. During those three decades, Hoover faded from public memory. The emotions, good and bad, that he once incited from his greatest supporters and harshest critics dissipated with time. In the academic realm, these thirty years witnessed explosive growth in the fields of intelligence and security studies, gender and sexuality, American conservatism, and policing, ensuring a fresh influx of scholars who are dedicated to untangling the FBI's past. It was time to look once again at Hoover.

The reviewers in this roundtable provide an essential understanding of Gage's *G-Man*. Erik Dahl's review highlights the historical echoes apparent throughout Gage's work and the nuanced balance that she brings to her study of Hoover, concluding that her biography serves as a "cautionary tale" of a "flawed hero." Gage depicts Hoover as a man whose leadership began with great promise but over time devolved into a tragedy of abuse. Dahl, a professor of intelligence studies, notes that some of the most critical issues facing the FBI during the early and mid-twentieth century remain equally relevant and vexing today. These fraught issues became the nexus for Hoover's worst indiscretions. Today, Americans continue to debate highly contested topics related to the FBI, such as the boundaries of domestic intelligence gathering and racism in law enforcement. *G-Man* depicts Hoover as a complicated individual, his life full of contradictions, and these paradoxes—the stark contrast between the best and worst aspects of Hoover—form the crux of Dahl's admiration for Gage's deft analysis.

Hoover's indiscretions have long gained the attention of scholars, but debates continue regarding the genesis of his basest behaviors. Was he a rogue figure, or did he act in tandem with a much larger, broken bureaucratic system? Historian Christopher Elias examines whether Hoover's leadership in the Bureau represented an amplification of American ideals or whether the director functioned as an outlier, forcing his influence on the government agency for nearly half a century. Elias demonstrates the finesse of Gage's argument that the Bureau operated in ways that a young Hoover could never have comprehended. The Bureau's growth reflected a parallel trajectory of similar American institutions, including churches, fraternities, and public schools. In Gage's biography, Hoover is less the cartoon villain and more the reflection of twentieth century American society and what it valued.

Political scientist Melinda Haas explores Gage's depiction of organizational dynamics, seen through the lens of Hoover's long tenure, remembering that the Bureau is but one agency in a much larger intelligence community. President Franklin D. Roosevelt feared the creation of a US law enforcement agency similar to Nazi Germany's Gestapo, and in many ways, his anxieties fed some of the FBI's most notable growth.

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Summer, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993).

During World War II, the FBI functioned as a well-known entity amidst a landscape of new and rapidly emerging state institutions; that it had been established in 1908, and that it had successfully navigated the 1930s “War on Crime,” lent it a legitimacy that ultimately propelled its expansion into intelligence gathering. Following the death of Roosevelt, however, Haas notes that postwar intelligence morphed into a competition of ideals regarding how the United States should function in relation to national security. Gage’s work highlights the tightrope that the leaders of American democracy traipsed in procuring domestic intelligence in postwar America, and Haas gleans the lesson from Hoover’s life on the necessity of the careful separation of intelligence and law enforcement.

Historian Loch Johnson draws upon his experience as a staff member working for the Church Committee’s 1975–1976 congressional investigation into intelligence community abuses, including those carried out by the FBI under Hoover’s command. Johnson, who served as Senator Frank Church’s aide, includes a moving anecdote of an interview he conducted with mathematician Anatol Rapoport, a Russian émigré to the United States who became a COINTELPRO target thanks to his dissent against the Vietnam War. As a part of COINTELPRO, the Bureau crafted anonymous letters falsely alleging Rapoport’s identification as a Communist. Johnson recalls meeting with Rapoport and showing him the FBI file detailing the Bureau’s use of illicit counterintelligence measures against him. In doing so, Johnson humanizes the great mass of people who came under investigation by Hoover. Noting Gage’s adept and balanced coverage of Hoover, Johnson also recalls Rapoport’s pain at realizing the FBI had intentionally tried to end his career. Hoover may have been skilled at leading the FBI, enough to remain in charge of the Bureau for nearly half a century, but the tragic effects of his worst indiscretions continued to ripple long after his death in 1972.

*G-Man*, which won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for biography, is a masterclass on Hoover’s life. Gage draws from an abundance of newly released sources to provide an unparalleled examination into Hoover, from his birth in 1895 until his death in 1972. Most notably, unlike prior biographies of Hoover, Gage solidly situates Hoover’s life within the broader subfields of US history, demonstrating how much our collective understanding of history—particularly regarding gender and sexuality, conservatism, and power dynamics—has evolved over the last three decades. Instead of merely noting Hoover’s Sunday School attendance, Gage places a young Hoover’s affection for church within the larger “Muscular Christianity” movement,<sup>7</sup> drawing upon advances in religious history to uncover the origins of Hoover’s stoic discipline and his belief in masculinity as a reflection of Christian character. She richly mines the expertise gained writing her 2010 book, *The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in Its First Age of Terror*,<sup>8</sup> to juxtapose the historical echoes of fear that propelled a jejune Hoover’s fight against anarchism in 1919 with an aged Hoover’s crusade against a volatile and violent New Left in the early 1970s. Her work benefits from advances in the field of gender and sexuality,<sup>9</sup> as she imbues her analysis of Hoover’s bachelorhood and decades-long

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<sup>7</sup> See Clifford Putney’s *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920*, (Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Beverly Gage, *The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in Its First Age of Terror* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See Douglas M. Charles’s *Hoover’s War on Gays: Exposing the FBI’s “Sex Deviates” Program* (Kansas University Press, 2015); Margot Canady’s *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

relationship with FBI Assistant Director and longtime companion Clyde Tolson with the critical understanding that evidence of one's sexuality resides in a lifetime of banal moments, not cherry-picked, sensational gossip. And she, perhaps more than any previous biographer, explores Hoover's lifelong, nuanced relationship to race, drawing upon archival records from Hoover's college fraternity, Kappa Alpha, to explore the influence of the South's "Lost Cause" narrative on a young Hoover's understanding of the world around him. Using newly released files from the Bureau's investigation into Martin Luther King Jr., she bookends Hoover's obsession with the Civil Rights leader as part of a larger life thoroughly steeped in segregation. She contrasts his paranoia towards the Civil Rights Movement with his Bureau's feeble efforts against white supremacy. A significant portion of her book chronicles the Bureau's work in Mississippi, including its investigations into the murders of Emmett Till and civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, guiding the reader to see that Hoover's life, although rooted in the bureaucracy of Washington DC, was deeply Southern, in both genteel and terrible ways.

Perhaps most impressive is Gage's ability to keep her narrative present in each moment she describes, be it a young Hoover's terse journal entries detailing the Washington DC social scene, the rippling tragedy of Hoover's father's mental illness, the suspended moments of grief in Washington, DC following President John F. Kennedy's assassination, or the amiable exchange of letters between Hoover and President Richard Nixon over many years. Gage blends the disparate threads of Hoover's storied tenure at the FBI, fulfilling the ambition that Ralph Waldo Emerson described in the best works of history, that "all public facts are to be individualized, all private facts are to be generalized. Then at once History becomes fluid and true, and Biography deep and sublime."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Gage has written the defining account of Hoover's life.

### Contributors:

**Beverly Gage** is John Lewis Gaddis Professor of History at Yale University.

**Melissa Graves** is an Associate Professor and Department Chair in the Department of Intelligence and Security Studies at The Citadel. Her book, *Nixon's FBI: Hoover, Watergate, and a Bureau in Crisis*, evaluates the historically complex and oftentimes fraught relationship between the President and FBI Director. Dr. Graves has published articles in *Foreign Policy*, the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *IACLEIA Journal of Intelligence Analysis*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Cognitive Engineering and Decision Making*, and *Security Journal*. She co-authored, with Carl Jensen and David McElreath, *Introduction to Intelligence Studies*, 3rd Edition (Taylor and Francis, 2022).

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Press, 2009); and David K. Johnson's *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," *Essays, First Series* (J. Fraser, 1841).

**Erik Dahl** is Associate Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and the author of *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Georgetown University Press, 2013). His latest book is *The COVID-19 Intelligence Failure: Why Warning Was Not Enough* (Georgetown University Press, 2023). He is a former chair of the Intelligence Studies Section of the International Studies Association.

**Christopher M. Elias** serves as Visiting Assistant Professor of American Studies at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. His book, *Gossip Men: J. Edgar Hoover, Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, and the Politics of Insinuation* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2021.

**Melinda Haas** is Assistant Professor of International Affairs at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research addresses the how congressional oversight regulation can have unintended effects on the types of covert action used in US foreign policy. Her other research interests include foreign policy decision-making, intelligence and secrecy, as well as international and constitutional law. Her research is published in *International Security*, the *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, and *The Diplomat*.

**Loch K. Johnson** is Regents Professor of International Affairs Emeritus in the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) at the University of Georgia. His most recent book is *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). He has been a Fellow at Yale University, a Visiting Scholar at Oxford University, a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, and senior editor of the international journal *Intelligence and National Security*. Professor Johnson received a PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Riverside. At the University of Georgia, he led the founding of SPIA in 2001, and was awarded the University's Presidential Medal in 2022.

Review by Erik Dahl, Naval Postgraduate School

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Beverly Gage has written a masterful biography of J. Edgar Hoover, one that will likely remain for years the standard work on Hoover and a fundamental resource for anyone seeking to understand the early history of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The book can be read as a classic tragedy, telling the story of a flawed—in this case, extremely flawed—hero, whose path leads inevitably to downfall and disaster. But as the book’s subtitle suggests, it can also be read as the story of the United States in the first three quarters of the twentieth century, as it wrestled with problems it continues to face today, such as racism, threats to national security, and debates over the extent of government power and the limits to domestic intelligence.

The tragedy of this book is clear: early on we see the young Hoover as a modern man, attempting to professionalize and bring scientific methods to the business of law enforcement. But by the end Hoover had become, as Gage puts it, “the man who stayed too long” (693), out of touch and uncomfortable in the modern world. This is not, however, a one-dimensional portrayal of Hoover as a hypocritical tyrant who broke the law even while claiming to uphold it and who remained in office through intimidation and fear. While it would be going too far to call this a sympathetic account, Gage has written a more balanced story of Hoover’s long life and career than we often see.<sup>1</sup>

The Hoover depicted here is a man of contradictions. For example, the man who would be responsible for the FBI’s infamous COINTELPRO domestic surveillance program and who tried to break the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King had earlier in his career fought the Ku Klux Klan and helped to bring down Senator Joseph McCarthy. During World War II Hoover opposed the government’s sweeping internment of Japanese Americans, but at the same time directed the FBI’s own internment program that took into custody thousands of Japanese, German, and Italian American noncitizen residents. And perhaps most poignantly, the man who pushed the FBI to embody a narrow vision of conservative, manly, Christian values was a man whose homosexuality was an open secret in Washington.

Hoover’s sexuality is one of several hot-button issues that this book helps put into context. Gage notes that although there is little specific documentary evidence to show that Hoover was gay—and in particular, the depiction of Hoover as a flamboyant cross-dresser appears to be unfounded—the record clearly demonstrates that his homosexuality was actually more open than secret. Hoover did not hesitate to use the FBI to quash rumors about his sexuality, but at the same time he did little to hide his intimate relationship with his long-time FBI assistant and companion, Clyde Tolson, and friends and colleagues routinely treated the two as a couple (407). The only surprise here is how accepting the press and official Washington were about Hoover’s private life.

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<sup>1</sup> Gage cites many of the conventional accounts, including Anthony Summers, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (G. P. Putnam’s, 1993). See also Mike German, *Disrupt, Discredit, and Divide: How the New FBI Damages Democracy* (The New Press, 2019).

The book also helps the reader understand how it was that Hoover was able to remain in power for so long. Gage notes that according to popular legend, Hoover kept his position through blackmail and fear. But while it was true that he held many secrets and was often feared, in reality he was able to serve as FBI director for 48 years “because many people, from the highest reaches of government down to the grassroots, wanted him there and supported what he was doing” (xiii).

Many of the episodes and controversies seem familiar today. Early in the book, for example, Gage describes how in 1919, after the First World War and the global flu pandemic, the country faced a wave of anarchist terror attacks (including by suicide bombing), growing racial tensions, and concerns about immigration. It was in that context that Hoover was put in charge of a new “Radical Division” within the Justice Department, and began what Gage describes as “an experiment unprecedented in federal history” that involved mass surveillance against noncitizens and citizens alike who were seen as threats (68).

The transition of the FBI from an organization that was focused solely on law enforcement into an intelligence agency is one of the major themes that runs through the book, and it is a transition that has continued in the decades after the 9/11 attacks. Much of this story is familiar. For example, the history of the FBI’s foreign intelligence operations, and the Special Intelligence Service in particular, has been examined in more detail by Darren W. Tromblay<sup>2</sup> and Zachary Selden.<sup>3</sup> But in its depiction of the FBI’s domestic intelligence activities, this book provides a welcome balance to be read alongside more stridently critical accounts by authors such as Mike German,<sup>4</sup> and those that appear to gloss over civil liberties violations, such as Tromblay.<sup>5</sup>

As Gage carefully demonstrates, Hoover did not transform the FBI into a domestic intelligence agency on his own. At each step, he was working with the approval of, and often under the direct orders from, his superiors. This was the case following the 1919 wave of terrorist bombings that culminated in a suicide bombing attack on the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, leading to what Gage describes as “an entire new system of political surveillance” (84).

Later, after Germany’s invasion of France in the Spring of 1940, fears of a fifth column of enemy spies and saboteurs led to “the single swiftest accumulation of power in Hoover’s career” (238). In this case, as more recently following the 9/11 attacks, it turned out that the threat had been exaggerated, but the result was a

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<sup>2</sup> Darren E. Tromblay, “Inside Out: Domestic Origins of U.S. Foreign Intelligence,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 34:3 (2021): 525-57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1798329>; Tromblay, “The FBI and Foreign Intelligence in the Domestic Setting,” *Intelligence and National Security* (2023): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2023.2202074>.

<sup>3</sup> Zachary Selden, “Special Intelligence Service of the Federal Bureau of Investigation: Forgotten Forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* (2022): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2022.2113988>.

<sup>4</sup> German, *Disrupt, Discredit, and Divide*.

<sup>5</sup> Tromblay, *Spying: Assessing US Domestic Intelligence Since 9/11* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019).



major turn of the FBI toward an intelligence role.<sup>6</sup> Gage describes how, as a result of the coming war, Hoover was asked, often secretly, by President Franklin Roosevelt to transform the FBI from a model law enforcement agency “into a major international intelligence and counterespionage agency” (244).

The wartime surveillance effort that Hoover directed was massive, with more than 100,000 informants within defense industry plants alone, and it embodied two aspects of domestic intelligence programs that continue to concern civil libertarians today (243). First, it was intended to prevent crime and subversive behavior, not catch the perpetrators after the fact, and this meant that the people coming under surveillance would not have broken any laws. But as Hoover saw it, they might very well break laws that could be passed in the future, once the United States joined the war. Second, the surveillance was often used for political purposes, against Roosevelt’s critics and political opponents, such as aviator Charles Lindbergh.

One of Hoover’s actions during the years leading up to World War II that combined both of these aspects, which was intended to prevent future threats and was used for political purposes, was the creation of what was called a “custodial detention index” (230). This was a card-file list of individuals who were to be arrested in time of war. While this in itself is problematic, after the Attorney General directed in 1943 that the index be abolished, Hoover’s FBI continued to maintain it in secret. The name was changed from Custodial Detention Index to Security Index, and FBI Headquarters directed staff in field offices that the index “should at no time be mentioned or alluded to.”<sup>7</sup>

The book is a reminder that as the United States deals today with problems of terrorism, crime, civil unrest, immigration, and domestic surveillance, it has been through much of this before. Gage describes debates during Hoover’s time over the use of what is today called “enhanced interrogation,” but which was then known as the use of the “third degree,” and she reminds us that there is nothing new in the use of military commissions to try “unlawful combatants,” as that was the mechanism by which six Nazi saboteurs were sentenced to death in 1942 (165, 273).

Gage also reminds us that disinformation and conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. For example, she describes how during the Eisenhower administration, the far-right John Birch Society spread outlandish claims such as that the president’s brother was actually running the country as part of a Communist plot (513-514). One wonders whether such stories would have gained more traction today, when they could have been circulated so much faster and more efficiently through social media and the 24-hour news cycle.

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<sup>6</sup> On the FBI following 9/11 see, for example, Adam D.M. Svendsen, “The Federal Bureau of Investigation and Change: Addressing US Domestic Counter-Terrorism Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security* 27:3 (2012): 371-397, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2012.668080>.

<sup>7</sup> On the later history of the Custodial Detention Index, see Agnes Gereben Schaefer, “The History of Domestic Intelligence in the United States: Lessons for Assessing the Creation of a New Counterterrorism Intelligence Agency,” in *The Challenge of Domestic Intelligence in a Free Society*, ed. Brian A. Jackson (RAND, 2009), 29.

Anyone needing to be reminded of just how far Hoover's FBI could go in its effort to root out perceived enemies will find plenty of evidence in these pages. The most egregious of these efforts was COINTELPRO, short for "counterintelligence program," which, as Gage describes, was much more than just an extensive domestic surveillance program. It was an active effort to disrupt domestic threats (455). As Gage writes, "the FBI was no longer in the business of watching and waiting. Under COINTELPRO, agents were supposed to make things happen" (457). This was essentially a covert action program kept secret from Congress and the courts, which the later Church Committee, a US Senate Select Committee that in 1975 investigated governmental intelligence abuses, would call "a sophisticated vigilante operation aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of First Amendment rights of speech and association, on the theory that preventing the growth of dangerous groups and the propagation of dangerous ideas would protect the national security and deter violence."<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most unsettling part of the book is Gage's description of how Hoover and the FBI engaged in what she calls "one of the most expansive disruption and harassment operations in Bureau history," aimed to discredit and destroy Martin Luther King even though, as the FBI itself acknowledged, he had broken no laws (583). Gage describes in lurid detail what is known about the FBI's audio surveillance of King's room at the Willard Hotel in Washington. She notes that only Hoover and "a handful" of others have actually heard those recordings, which are sealed under a court order that will expire in 2027. But she recounts how the FBI, under Hoover's direction, later sent an anonymous package to King containing a letter describing his "abnormal personal behavior" and making what appears to have been encouragement for him to commit suicide, together with a tape with recordings from the hotel surveillance (608-609). King's wife, Coretta Scott King, eventually opened the package and shared it with her husband. King suspected that it was from the FBI, and Gage describes the scene in which King, during a telephone conversation, said that "they are out to break me" (614). In a sad irony, the FBI was listening in the whole time, and reporting King's reaction back to Hoover.

COINTELPRO and the persecution of King would have been enough to cement Hoover's harmful legacy, but in 1969 his FBI mounted a counterintelligence effort against the Black Panther Party "that surpassed in both its ambition and its cruelty anything done to the Communist Party, the Ku Klux Klan, or King himself" (681). This effort included spreading the false rumors that actress Jean Seberg, a prominent supporter of the Black Panther Party, was pregnant by a member of the Panthers. Seberg lost the baby and later committed suicide, which may have been due in large part due to the lingering effects of years of FBI surveillance and harassment.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (the Church Committee), *Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans*, Book III, p. 3 (GPO, 1976), [https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94755\\_III.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94755_III.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Wendell Rawls Jr., "F.B.I. Admits Planting a Rumor To Discredit Jean Seberg in 1970," *New York Times*, 15 September 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/09/15/archives/fbi-admits-planting-a-rumor-to-discredit-jean-seberg-in-1970-former.html>.

This is a work of history, not political science, and the reader will find little here about what lessons Hoover's life might hold for us today. Nonetheless, it is striking how similar the challenges and controversies depicted in this book are to the world we now live in. The story of Hoover's life is more than a tragedy: it is a cautionary tale, and Beverly Gage is to be thanked for writing this book.

At the core of Beverly Gage’s magisterial biography of J. Edgar Hoover stands an essential question: Was the world that Hoover created—both in constructing the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a government agency and in presenting himself as that agency’s ultimate leader—in line with the larger American project; or was Hoover an outlier, engaged in work that stood in opposition to twentieth-century American political, social, and cultural values?

Properly addressing this question first necessitates defining Hoover’s mission. In the earliest pages of *G-Man*, Gage refers to Hoover’s “creation” as “a political surveillance force without precedent in American life” (xi). But she also recognizes and traces Hoover’s impact beyond helping to create the modern surveillance state. Hoover influenced the composition of the American federal bureaucracy in terms of its role, scope, and tone; how law enforcement officers in the United States think about their role in society; the way bureaucrats and politicians use (and misuse) mass media; and how the American public regards threats to the United States. As Gage ably demonstrates across *G-Man*’s 837 pages, Hoover’s creation was multifaceted, and its impact reverberated—and continues to reverberate—beyond what the man himself may have imagined.

“Hoover,” Gage writes, “always insisted that his creation was thoroughly American” (xi). By and large, she seems to agree, noting that Hoover “did not invent most of the ideas he espoused” and tracing the multiple ways in which he was introduced to those concepts during his youth and young adulthood (xvii). One of Hoover’s great talents was how he mobilized those ideas:

He legitimated them and knew how to put them into action. His emphasis on professionalism and apolitical expertise insulted him from critics who said he was nothing but a far-right ideologue. Conversely, his declamations on the perils of atheism, social disorder, and defiance of the law gave him a passionate grassroots base all but unheard-of among bureaucrats. It was this combination of factors—openness and secrecy, liberalism and conservatism, hard and soft power—that gave Hoover his extraordinary staying power (xvii-xviii).

That staying power meant that Hoover had to shift his perspective to meet the multiple versions of the federal state that existed during his nearly fifty-year tenure as the head of the FBI and its forerunner, the Bureau of Investigation (BOI). This included: Warren G. Harding’s post-World War I pro-business state promoting a “return to normalcy”; the New Deal State and arsenal of democracy of Franklin Roosevelt; the Cold War-era National Security State of Harry S. Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy; the modified welfare state of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society; and the realistic, proto-corporate state of Richard Nixon. Gage shows that Hoover was surprisingly nimble at changing to fit these various moments. She notes that the FBI was “a New Deal initiative” and that “the tools of New Deal liberalism—

professionalization, centralization, administrative expansion—are what enabled [Hoover’s] rise” (xv).<sup>1</sup> But she also demonstrates how Hoover was able to build an organization that could survive periods of shrinking federal expenditures, laissez-faire approaches to governance, and presidential meddling. In short, Hoover was able to make the FBI so essential to the operation of the American state that to significantly curtail its footprint was all but unimaginable (at least while Hoover was at the helm).

Ultimately, Gage deftly (and convincingly) argues that Hoover was a product of American identity, epitomizing the values of his age rather than bucking them. Carefully tracing his moral and intellectual development, Gage reveals how a variety of American institutions—including mainline Protestantism, purportedly-meritocratic public schools, and the Kappa Alpha Order fraternity—imbued in Hoover a combination of quintessentially American ideals, including temperance, independence, piety, righteousness, and stoicism. Many of these qualities can be seen in the masculinized, racialized Christianity of Hoover’s upbringing, themes that have been recently explored by Lerone A. Martin in his recent book *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover*.<sup>2</sup> It would be more comforting to see Hoover as an outlier, a fascistic megalomaniac whose psychological shortcomings drove him to cartoon villainy. Gage’s portrayal is more troubling: that of a man who was the product of the same forces that created Henry Luce’s “American Century”: moral certitude, a faith in meritocracy, institutional fidelity, adherence to hierarchy, faith in free-market capitalism, and a devotion to paternalism. If Hoover is what America hath wrought, then what does it mean to consider the nation exceptional?

It is in engaging with these larger themes that *G-Men* contributes to the genre, joining other classic works of biography that transcend their subject to become portraits of a moment as much as portraits of a person. (Here I am thinking of works such as Les and Tamara Payne’s biography of Malcolm X, Henry Mayer’s examination of William Lloyd Garrison, Neil Sheehan’s *A Bright Shining Lie*, Nick Salvatore’s work on Eugene Debs, and Robert Caro’s series on Lyndon Johnson.)<sup>3</sup>

With respect to contemporary political discourse, the key issue *G-Man* raises is how American citizens are supposed to check government overreach and hold those in power accountable. As this conundrum becomes increasingly non-academic, it is both helpful and distressing to have Gage’s cogent analysis in

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<sup>1</sup> Gage’s suggestion of modern liberal values leading to troubling outcomes rhymes with themes developed in Caroline Elkins’s recent exploration of violence in the British Empire. See: Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (Knopf, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Lerone A. Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Les and Tamara Payne, *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X* (Liveright, 2020); Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (Random House, 1988); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (University of Illinois Press, 1982); Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (Knopf, 1982); Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (Knopf, 1990); Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (Knopf, 2002); Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (Knopf, 2012).

mind. Hoover's actions tested the limits of American democracy with respect to government surveillance, privacy, and the legal rights of citizens. At the same time, he was a master manipulator of the media, using newspapers, periodicals, films, and radio to publicize and manage his vision. This combination of characteristics is undoubtedly familiar to today's American citizens, regardless of their political persuasion.

So who or what finally limited Hoover and who should contemporary Americans look to in their efforts to reinforce democratic guardrails? Gage identifies three key institutions which played a part in reigning in the FBI's worst abuses: Congress, the media, and the courts. Following Hoover's 1972 death, Congressional investigations of FBI by the Church and Pike Committees (in the Senate and House, respectively) were essential to identifying malfeasance and instituting systems of oversight. Those investigations led to the establishment of permanent intelligence committees in both houses of Congress and, along with the fallout from Watergate, helped institute procedures for government openness and accountability. A series of investigations by local and national media outlets—most notably NBC reporter Carl Stern's December 1973 reports on COINTELPRO, the FBI's Cold War-era counterintelligence program—also prompted a re-examination of the Bureau's operations and led to a public questioning of the FBI's motives and methods. Gage herself contributed to this public discourse in 2014 when she publicized her discovery of an unredacted copy of the 1964 letter the Bureau sent to Martin Luther King, Jr., calling him “evil” and suggesting he kill himself.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most dramatically, a series of legal rulings in the 1970s found the FBI responsible for unconstitutional actions. Key moments included the 1973 Socialist Workers Party's lawsuit against the FBI and the 1978 indictments of former Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray, Deputy FBI Director Mark Felt, and intelligence specialist Ed Miller on charges stemming from Watergate, with Felt and Miller becoming “the first intelligence officers ever convicted in criminal court for abusing Americans' civil liberties” (729).

A key problem is that the most significant checks on FBI power were only instituted following Hoover's death, after he had caused so much damage. Hoover's ability to skirt those limitations during his directorship likely stemmed from a combination of two factors. First, as Gage carefully tracks, Hoover was able to dodge the efforts of outsiders to control the FBI through a masterful combination of misdirection, willful ignorance, and public relations. Second, many of those who were in a position to reign in Hoover—including members of the media, politicians, other bureaucrats, and the eight presidents under whom he served—tended to be the beneficiaries of his policies and actions. One horrifying truth at the core of Hoover's story is the fact that the system under which he labored, and the version of it he helped build during his lifetime, was more interested in extending and perpetuating its own power than in diligently guarding democratic standards.

Another point of ongoing fascination for both historians and the general public has been J. Edgar Hoover's intimate life. Longstanding rumors of Hoover's homosexuality found their way into the public

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<sup>4</sup> Beverly Gage, “What an Uncensored Letter to MLK Reveals,” *New York Times* 16 November 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/magazine/what-an-uncensored-letter-to-mlk-reveals.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/magazine/what-an-uncensored-letter-to-mlk-reveals.html).

consciousness via a series of articles in *The National Enquirer* and Anthony Summers' 1993 biography of Hoover.<sup>5</sup> Those rumors—especially the one holding that Hoover enjoyed wearing female clothing and participated in homosexual orgies—fundamentally transformed public discourse around Hoover. Many of the rumors were referenced across pop culture, including in the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* and in the satirical movie *Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult*. In response, leading FBI historian Athan Theoharis published *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex, and Crime*, a “historical antidote” that sought to take a more capacious look at the available evidence on Hoover’s sexual identity and how it may have influenced his leadership of the FBI, with Theoharis concluding that “each of the allegations [about Hoover’s homosexuality] turned out to be baseless.”<sup>6</sup> (Given the centrality of Hoover’s sexuality to Clint Eastwood’s 2011 biopic *J. Edgar*, it appears that Theoharis was not fully successful.)<sup>7</sup>

Beyond pure voyeurism, one of the elements that attracts attention to this aspect of Hoover’s biography is the grand irony of a moral crusader engaging in the precise activities he so vocally opposed. From Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon D. C. Stephenson to evangelical leader Ted Haggard, from renowned preacher Henry Ward Beecher to Senator Larry Craig, American history has no shortage of moralists who are caught doing exactly the things they rail against. But perhaps the rumors about Hoover have taken off precisely because he was so adept at collecting secret information about others and using it to his advantage: irony upon irony, it would seem.

Gage’s exploration of Hoover’s intimate life is cautious, judicious, and displays an admirable fidelity to the available evidence. Her approach is particularly laudable given the modern audience’s expectation that a biographer delve deeply into their subject’s sexual life.<sup>8</sup> *G-Man*’s interest in Hoover’s sexuality is more a byproduct of Gage’s efforts to construct a psychological profile of her subject than a deep investigation into his sexual politics. And Gage is successful in demonstrating when Hoover’s concerns about public perception of his sexuality influenced his actions as Bureau Director. For example, Gage argues that—likely due to self-preservation—Hoover was less *personally* active in the persecution of homosexuals than other historians have posited, instead leaving the work of bolstering the Lavender Scare to Bureau underlings. This contention represents a slight departure from the recent work of FBI Historian Douglas M. Charles, whose book *Hoover’s War on Gays* credits Hoover with spearheading much of the Bureau’s “War on the Sex

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Summers, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (Putnam, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Athan Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex, and Crime: An Historical Antidote* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 44. For a detailed analysis of Theoharis’s work on Hoover’s sexuality, see: Claire Bond Potter, “Queer Hoover: Sex, Lies, and Political History,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15:3 (2006): 355-381.

<sup>7</sup> *J. Edgar*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> One wonders how Frederik Logevall will treat John F. Kennedy’s numerous extramarital affairs in the forthcoming second volume of his biography of the President. See: Frederik Logevall, *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917-1956* (Random House, 2020).

Criminal” beginning in 1937 and leading its efforts to surveil “sex deviates” during the middle decades of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

There is something slightly decadent about the fact that public memory of a man who used hearsay and insinuation so readily has come to be shaped by rumor and gossip. But for those seeking a more judicious, nuanced understanding of Hoover and his legacy, Gage’s biography will serve as a lodestar for years to come.

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas M. Charles, *Hoover’s War on Gays: Exposing the FBI’s “Sex Deviates” Program* (University Press of Kansas), 2015.



Beverly Gage's *G-Man* is a masterful work that expands our knowledge of J. Edgar Hoover and the role he played in the most critical events in American history. She brings new life to a largely caricatured man and offers a nuanced portrayal of a powerful Washington insider who was secure in his beliefs and alternatively on the right and wrong side of history. Given that Hoover served as FBI director from 1924 until his death in 1972, under eight different presidents—some of whom counted him as a nuisance, a confidant, and a friend—few men have had the same influence over American domestic politics.

Hoover's tenure saw him build the modern federal law enforcement bureaucracy, oscillating between missions that are more akin to traditional police work and those that are related closely to intelligence and national security imperatives. His emphasis on professionalization, modern technology, hierarchy, and a veil of impartiality successfully masked how Hoover's conservative values could be wielded by the state, many times in secret, to create institutionally repeatable abuses of power.

Early in his tenure at the Department of Justice, in 1920, Hoover actively created an identity as the Justice Department's leading expert on American Communism, analogizing it to the work of violent criminals who were actively plotting the overthrow of the US government (77-78). At the Radical Division of the Bureau of Investigation, Hoover was less engaged in day-to-day law enforcement, which was seen at the time as an inappropriate role for a federal government agency, and instead was tasked with disrupting domestic opposition through "political surveillance: gathering, analyzing, and coordinating information about allegedly dangerous groups" (94). Unlike the type of crimes that local police investigated, the Radical Division was tasked with investigating groups deemed dangerous to the federal government, thus beginning the conflation of criminal and national security designations.

In the 1930s, Hoover was able to push back and strategically choose the tasks that were best suited for his professional, scientific, and well-trained agents. By deploying his conservative political ideals in support of the racial and social hierarchy, Hoover was able to create conditions of "bureaucratic autonomy" that allowed the FBI to uphold those hierarchies while at the same time appearing to be impartial, apolitical public servants (103-104, 126). In the late 1930s, Hoover's G-men were shifted away from their focus on bank robbers and gangsters, at the request of President Franklin Roosevelt, to investigate fascism and communism as the biggest international and domestic threats (204-205). As with foreign intelligence-gathering, this goal was meant to be carried out clandestinely, without the notoriety of a public trial and conviction but more akin to the means by which the state dealt with national security threats.<sup>1</sup> This secrecy

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory F. Treverton, "Terrorism, Intelligence and Law Enforcement: Learning the Right Lessons," *Intelligence and National Security* 18:4 (2003): 121-40, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520310001688899>; Matthew C. Waxman, "Police and National Security: American Local Law Enforcement and Counterterrorism after 9/11," *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 3:2 (2009): 377-408; Diego Esparza and Thomas C. Bruneau, "Closing the Gap Between Law Enforcement and National Security Intelligence: Comparative Approaches," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 32:2 (2019): 322-53, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2018.1522219>.

was intended not just for tactical advantage, but also to avoid congressional oversight (206).<sup>2</sup> But Hoover was able to avoid the ire of Congress insofar as the FBI did not create any scandal that prompted its regulation, and limited itself to intelligence gathering on the “broad picture” of the day.<sup>3</sup>

As a political scientist, I am interested in what Gage’s new evaluation of Hoover tells us about the FBI’s function within the US intelligence bureaucracy. In the late 1930s, there was, of course, no national, centralized foreign intelligence organization. Furthermore, as fear grew of Nazi infiltration of the United States, “there was no federal agency specifically tasked with handling foreign espionage on American soil” (214-215). Therefore, the job fell to the FBI, in which Hoover approached cases of suspected German spies like criminal prosecutions rather than counterintelligence, and as a result, lost important informants who fled the country. Although the FBI seemed inept at conducting espionage investigations, it was the only possible option. Despite his administration’s media messages that the FBI would not be controlling a “central spy-control bureau,” Roosevelt authorized the FBI in 1936 to take the lead in efforts to combat espionage, sabotage, and subversion in the United States. But there was no official record, and no congressional or diplomatic involvement, in this secret shaping of responsibility for foreign and domestic intelligence-gathering (215). This was expanded in 1939 to allow the FBI to take charge of “all federal home-front investigations involving ‘espionage, counter-espionage, and sabotage in anticipation of the coming war’” (228-229).

The national security threat posed by the onset of World War II opened an avenue for the FBI to gain power secretly in the political-intelligence realm, which would come to be repurposed in furtherance of Hoover’s own ideals after war’s end. But this hybrid of law enforcement and intelligence was uniquely susceptible to engaging in abuses of power since the targeting decisions of the FBI remained secret and unchecked—and thus were subject to Hoover’s ideals and choices in which the FBI gained its footing as an “independent political force” (292). Although Hoover had secured Roosevelt’s support for greater FBI involvement in foreign intelligence, the president’s sudden death in 1945 created a critical juncture in which competing views of foreign intelligence were pitted against each other. Postwar intelligence gathering was a competition of two worldviews. The first was “Wild Bill” Donovan’s Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and their cowboy-like methods, which Hoover saw as a reflection of the OSS’s inability to engage in rigorous administration of such an important governmental purpose (296-297). The second one involved Hoover championing the FBI as the head of global peacetime intelligence, supplemented by military and naval intelligence. Hoover ironically claimed that the FBI was the best choice to lead global intelligence because of “its acknowledgment of constitutional limits, its willingness to abide by laws and rules” (303). But, as Gage argues, the FBI’s bureaucratic efficiency, plus the secrecy engendered by wartime necessity, could

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<sup>2</sup> Luca Trenta, “‘An Act of Insanity and National Humiliation’: The Ford Administration, Congressional Inquiries and the Ban on Assassination,” *Journal of Intelligence History* 17:2 (2018): 121-40, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16161262.2018.1430431>; Melinda Haas, “Origins of Oversight: Covert Action Amendments to the National Security Act of 1947,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 36:4 (2023): 1297-1318, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2022.2119446>.

<sup>3</sup> Loch K. Johnson, *Spy Watching: Intelligence Accountability in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

easily become a tool of unbridled excess, as would later be seen in the era of COINTELPRO, the FBI's counterintelligence program. But President Harry Truman did not allow Hoover the same kind of personal access as Roosevelt had granted him, and he maintained personal doubts about the FBI's appropriate role. Gage's evidence from Truman's writings, in which the president asserted that "We want no Gestapo or Secret Police," and "F.B.I. is tending in that direction" reveals that Hoover's administrative wizardry was unable to convince Truman that the FBI was the best for the political intelligence job (299-300). As a result, Truman pushed for a global intelligence body that was centralized around the State Department and military intelligence, with the FBI excluded. Crucially, the Central Intelligence Group (later, the CIA) was responsible for global peacetime intelligence, with FBI relegated to the domestic side of peacetime intelligence gathering (304).

Hoover sought to use this power broadly to investigate the second Red Scare, in which he secretly grew surveillance against the Communist Party out of fear that the Soviet Union had been attempting to infiltrate the U.S. government for more than a decade (321). The Venona project, a US counterintelligence program to decrypt Soviet diplomatic communications, had begun in 1947 under the Army Security Agency (later, the NSA), and substantiated Hoover's fears of a Soviet espionage network on U.S. soil (345-46). However, the use of Venona decrypts to secure convictions was impossible without revealing the sources and methods that made Venona so powerful. Thus, many of the espionage prosecutions at this time required the FBI to search out corroborating evidence for the purposes of securing espionage convictions in court.<sup>4</sup> Evidence-gathering became even easier under the Eisenhower administration, which loosened restrictions on listening devices, and granted the FBI the authority to look into "suspicious" government employees (420).

Gage's book ably shows how Hoover's FBI used similar tactics across the anti-Communist missions of the 1950s as well as the racial tensions underlying the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In 1956, the most famous example of Hoover's overreach, COINTELPRO, was developed initially to disrupt the Communist Party not by relying on the courts or Congress, but instead by using the FBI's vast bureaucratic resources "to manipulate, misinform, and disrupt the party in secret" (454-55). This reliance on secrecy, as wielded by the FBI alone, led to methods that look strikingly similar to those in modern election interference.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Hoover was interested in polarization: "wasting the party's time," "preventing resolution on contentious party issues," "stirring up anger" and "keeping the Party divided" (457). Disruption of the Communist Party's political power did not require criminal investigation, prosecution, or deportation; instead, it relied on sowing the seeds of chaos through anonymous letters, informants, and FBI-crafted pamphlets. These methods of subversion—political action, propaganda—are reminiscent of those used in

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<sup>4</sup> K. A. Cuordileone, "The Torment of Secrecy: Reckoning with American Communism and Anticommunism after Venona," *Diplomatic History* 35:4 (2011): 615-642, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.00970.x>.

<sup>5</sup> Darin E. W. Johnson, "Russian Election Interference and Race-Baiting," *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* 9:2 (2019): 212-13.

covert action abroad, showing how a lack of political will to oversee intelligence institutions can create incentives toward the same means of disruption (458).<sup>6</sup>

Hoover's COINTELPRO methods were expansive, and by the 1960s were being applied to minority groups and other members of the New Left who were suspected of being "fellow travelers" with the Communist agenda. The FBI's role in early espionage investigations and the anti-Communist efforts of the world wars made Hoover's efforts at likening the threat of civil disobedience and racial integration to domino theory that much more acceptable to the average American. This group of threats to Hoover's conservative values came to comprise black political organizations, student groups, and, most importantly, civil rights activists. This shift also saw the FBI's counterintelligence playbook shifting from intelligence collection to evidence creation, expanding far beyond the ethics underlying good law enforcement investigation (682). And, of course, this expansive prejudice and racism became hard to hide insofar as civil rights activists as like Martin Luther King, Jr. suffered the most expansive of governmental targeting and torment (604-611).

But what can students of history and the intelligence bureaucracy learn from J. Edgar Hoover and his undeniably unique bureaucratic tenure? Could the worst abuses of the FBI, as revealed in the mid-1970s congressional investigations (728-729), have been prevented by US government officials limiting Hoover's ability to use his personal discretion, instead of increasingly expanding it throughout Hoover's tenure? Perhaps the invasive domestic surveillance and entrapment that was used against Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 period illustrates how domestic intelligence organizations can still be re-tasked in the furtherance of national security objectives without any real check or oversight of that executive branch decision.<sup>7</sup> Would Truman's fears of a modern Gestapo be assuaged if he knew that the immense US Intelligence Community was headed by a new centralizing authority—the Office of the Director of National Intelligence? The power wielded by the FBI in terms of domestic terrorism has now also been split with the Department of Homeland Security, but that may not mitigate the risks of overreach that the tools of national security investigations provide to law enforcement agencies.<sup>8</sup>

Most importantly for scholars of the intelligence bureaucracy, Gage's prize-winning work serves as a warning against allowing domestic intelligence-gathering in the name of national security. Whether warning the American public against Communism, the potential for cooperation between the Communist Party and civil rights activists, or more modern threats such as Islamic or homegrown right-wing

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<sup>6</sup> Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (CQ Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> "Matt Apuzzo, Adam Goldman, Eileen Sullivan and Chris Hawley of the Associated Press," *Pulitzer Prizes*, 2012, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/matt-apuzzo-adam-goldman-eileen-sullivan-and-chris-hawley>.

<sup>8</sup> "Domestic Terrorism: Further Actions Needed to Strengthen FBI and DHS Collaboration to Counter Threats | U.S. GAO," *U.S. Government Accountability Office*, 2 March 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104720>; "President's Intelligence Advisory Board (PIAB) and Intelligence Oversight Board (IOB) Review of FISA Section 702 and Recommendations for Reauthorization," President's Intelligence Advisory Board, July 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Presidents-Intelligence-Advisory-Board-and-Intelligence-Oversight-Board-Review-of-FISA-Section-702-and-Recommendations-for-Reauthorization.pdf>.

extremism, this book shows how it can be too easy to subjugate civil liberties when they are mixed with foreign intelligence-gathering. Hoover was a consummate bureaucrat who was pushed into the shadowy jurisdiction of intelligence gathering, and he was unmoored by its laws, norms, and lack of clear endpoint of criminal conviction. British intelligence officer (and Soviet double agent) Kim Philby, one of the best reasons for Hoover's continued paranoia about Communist spies, disrespected Hoover as an intelligence officer but stated presciently that "Hoover is a great politician. His blanket methods and ruthless authoritarianism are the wrong weapons for the subtle world of intelligence" (383). *G-Man* teaches us to better maintain that crumbling wall that separates intelligence and law enforcement.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Treverton, "Terrorism, Intelligence and Law Enforcement."

Review by Loch K. Johnson, University of Georgia, Athens

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J. Edgar Hoover served as Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI or “the Bureau”) and its precursors in the Department of Justice (DOJ) from 1924-1972—an extraordinarily long run. Was he a praiseworthy public servant, or a racist demagogue running a secret political surveillance organization? According to this splendid biography, he was both, with an emphasis on the latter at the height of his career. Beverly Gage has successfully undertaken a mammoth probe into the nation’s top G-Man. Her sensible approach is the quintessential historian’s methodology: a year-by-year unfolding of the subject’s life. Despite its length, this book’s outstanding research and clear writing, coupled with the intrinsic importance of the subject matter, led to an enjoyable read.

The book begins with Hoover’s birth in Washington, DC, on 1 January 1885. He was a cosseted child of middle-class parents, a talented student, and then a renowned bureaucrat until his sudden and fatal heart attack on 1 May 1972. Between these bookends, Gage provides a richly documented story of how the FBI Director became one of the most identifiable public figures in the nation’s history.<sup>1</sup>

As a student in DC’s segregated school system, Hoover displayed an orderly mind and tidy habits. He earned “A” grades and was a debate champion, captain of the cadets, and valedictorian. He continued his education at George Washington University (GW), acquiring a law degree in 1917. His first career step was into the Department of Justice (DOJ), where he immediately proved to be an innovative administrator.

Hoover was soon assigned to the Radical Division of the Department’s Bureau of Investigation, where (Gage tells us) “he found his life’s mission” (61). Here he would begin to engage in political surveillance that was aimed at anarchists, socialists, Communists, and Black activists, a preoccupation that would shape his future. Hoover proved a master of bureaucratic procedures; he was a “wunderkind,” Gage notes (61). He advanced rapidly to the top of the Radical Division and crafted his initial administrative *tour de force*, an elaborate filing system. This method organized large quantities of information about radicals in America, all neatly typed on three-by-five index cards that filled boxes in vast rooms where female staff members sorted them out. He left the less clerical, higher paying positions to men, often former GW students who had been members of the Southern-based Kappa Alpha (KA) fraternity, with square jaws, muscular builds, and a fawning attitude toward Hoover.

His image as a competent division chief began to grow as Justice Department personnel increasingly viewed him as the go-to guy for intelligence on potential criminal activities. His databanks help the DOJ organize the controversial Palmer raids in 1919 (named after Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer), which deported

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<sup>1</sup> Gage’s book is thorough and comes with a solid bibliography. Here are a couple of additional works I have found valuable in my own research: John T. Elliff, *The Reform of FBI Intelligence Operations* (Princeton University Press, 1979); and, more recently, FBI historian Darren Tromblay, “From TOPLEV to ALCHEMY: The FBI’s Manipulation of Liaisons between U.S. Communist Groups and Foreign Governments to Disrupt Malign Influence from Moscow and Beijing,” paper, International Studies Association, Montreal, Canada (2023).

over 1,000 American citizens who were considered risks to US security even though with little evidence to support many of these claims. “Just twenty-four years old, in his position for less than half a year,” writes Gage, “Hoover had already made a mark on national politics” (73).

Hoover had moved from a focus on anarchists to ridding the nation of Communists. As did many another successful public figures in this country, he had come upon a sure-fire way to gain attention in the hurly-burly of Washington politics, and he did this thirty years before Senator Joe McCarthy he became a McCarthyite. As a budding expert on the Red Scare, armed with this anti-Communist “magic formula” (81), Hoover’s standing in DOJ burgeoned and in 1921 he was appointed Director of the Bureau of Investigation. In an early manifestation of his instincts to defame critics, those in the Department who disapproved of his sometimes inadequately researched deportation cases became Hoover’s targets for surveillance. East coast lawyers, New York *Times* reporters, and other “liberals” who supported progressive causes became prime adversaries.

While Hoover refined his political surveillance skills, he was also developing his organization into a first-rate model of law enforcement practices which was emulated (at Hoover’s urging) by local police departments across the land. His index-card files expanded with intelligence that was related to antitrust and anti-corruption cases, along with auto theft and prostitution. Another of his administration successes was the development of a national criminal fingerprint filing system that aided both federal and local criminal investigations. He also established an arsenal of crime statistics that were useful for understanding law enforcement needs, and he fostered scientific forensic lab work. Further, in 1933 he led the Bureau of Investigation into a full-scale war against bank robbers, kidnappers, and other national criminals. He was now in charge of a “superpolice force” (154), hunting down the likes of John Dillinger, “Pretty Boy” Floyd, and George “Machine Gun” Kelly. As Hoover started to play hardball with celebrated underworld figures, his methods grew harsh. Brutal interrogations were now a part of FBI “law enforcement,” and Hoover armed the Bureau’s field agents with guns. As Gage puts it: “...bloodshed was now a regular feature of life at the Bureau [of Investigation]” (163). Hoover also expanded the use of wiretaps and informants.

Despite these excesses, Hoover’s attention to detail, tolerance for the tedious, and ferocious work ethic continued to stand out as, in 1935, the Bureau of Investigation morphed into the modern Federal Bureau of Investigation. That same year Hoover established the FBI National Academy, which was widely viewed as a first-rate educational facility to prepare G-Men for their profession.

The outbreak of World War Two reinforced Hoover’s early interest in combating German sympathizers and Communists. This led the FBI down the road toward counterintelligence (CI), investigating the influence of hostile foreign intelligence services secretly at work against the United States inside this country. The Bureau had become America’s chief CI agency and, as such, further evolved into a major domestic surveillance organization. Hoover’s ubiquitous stacks of index cards underwent an exponential expansion. The names of Soviet spies in the files were sometimes warranted and sometimes imagined, as the US national security state with a federal surveillance capability was born.

The G-men even entered the international realm in 1940, conducting intelligence operations throughout Latin America. As Gage points out, for the FBI “...intelligence was no longer a sideshow ... it *was* the show” (239). The Bureau was at this point “a hybrid institution—one part law enforcement agency, one part intelligence bureau” (274). The FBI had evolved into a large organization, which was roughly four times larger than it had been before the war, with hundreds of agents (none of whom was a woman or Black).

Gage effectively chronicles the Bureau’s period of institution building from 1942-1945, then its next phase of becoming an influential political force in Washington from 1945-1959. At the beginning of this second phase, Hoover experienced one of his few setbacks. when President Harry Truman ordered the Bureau out of the international spy business. That domain would be reserved for the Central Intelligence Group, the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). No more FBI espionage agents roaming around Latin America, or anywhere else overseas. The Bureau would be strictly America’s domestic spy agency. (This changed somewhat in the 1990s, as the FBI shouldered its way into the investigation of international crime activities abroad, which required access to limited embassy billets for Bureau agents and led to squabbles with the State Department and the CIA.) Still, Hoover had some positive achievements, and he deserves praise as well for his opposition to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s program of Japanese internment during the war.

But the coin had another side.

Red-baiting and otherwise denigrating adversaries, along with use of FBI agents to surveil and harass them, had become Hoover’s *modus operandi*. This dark side would eventually cause him to be remembered less by critics, including Gage, as Mr. Administrator and more as Mr. Ruthless Political Operator. Hoover sought to fill the Bureau not only with his ideal of white men in white shirts, conservative ties, and well-pressed suits, but he had as well his own “personal vision of national virtue,” as Gage observes (xvii). She tells us (119) that the preferred G-Man profile, in Hoover’s view, was a Mason, a GW grad, and a fraternity man (ideally, KA). And the United States was supposed to be religious (ideally Protestant Christian); anti-Communist; devoted to “law and order”; and skeptical about calls for civil rights reform. This latter tenet in Hoover’s philosophy obliquely pointed to one of his key motivations: white rule in America. The FBI Director had perfected the art of the dog whistle. As Gage notes, Hoover’s “talk of crime and juvenile delinquency was mostly a coded conversation about race” (629). This ugly dimension of Hoover’s personality was surpassed only by his overarching desire for bureaucratic survival as Bureau Director, even if that meant having to get along (at least on the surface) with liberal presidents during his tenure. (Four out of the eight presidents he served under from Roosevelt through Richard Nixon so qualified for this label.) This survivalist rule was sorely tested when it came to John F. Kennedy. One of the few individuals he might have liked even less (and camouflaged this dislike even less well) was the President’s brother, Robert F. “Bobby” Kennedy, who, as Attorney General, was Hoover’s boss for a while. The feeling was mutual.

Those who failed to buy into Hoover’s vision of national virtue, could end up on the FBI’s political and ideological enemies list. In practical terms, this could mean that such people would be placed under surveillance by the Bureau’s agents and informants. Worse, they might even qualify as a target of



COINTELPRO, the FBI's counterintelligence program that was designed to secretly ruin the reputation, career, and family ties of Hoover's enemies. The CIA had its covert actions abroad; with COINTELPRO, the FBI had its covert actions at home.

What stands out most about this period, though, is the amplification of earlier Hoover hallmarks: racial prejudice and anti-Communism. Here were MRIs of the Director's soul, indelibly staining his legend as an administrative genius. On the race question, he deserves some credit for concern about the lynching of blacks by Klan-types in the United States; but his efforts proved limited and feckless, and were overwhelmed by the ability of whites in lynching states to thwart local "justice" by freeing suspects after rigged trials. A further impediment was the lack of a federal anti-lynching law, which was blocked chiefly by congressional Dixiecrats. Gage movingly recounts one heart-wrenching case after another of Black citizens suffering torture and even death at the hands of white mobs. Time and again, Hoover had opportunities to help protect civil rights activists in the South, but he persistently declined. The Director's response was "...to indulge his own prejudices rather than challenge them" (507).

Hoover's "central postwar mission" (321), however, was combating domestic Communism. Gage reviews several FBI counterintelligence cases, including those involving the American Communist sympathizers Elizabeth Bentley and Alger Hiss. These second red-scare endeavors, aided by wiretap evidence from the Army and from Hoover's own "technicians," led Hoover into both legitimate CI activities against turncoats, but also an association with the often reckless House Un-American Activities Committee. This tie with HUAC taught the FBI Director the value of cultivating lawmakers, usually of the GOP variety (allies against Hoover's liberal bugbears), for purposes of FBI budget enhancements and the building of political alliances in Washington. Not coincidentally, key congressional committees hired former FBI agents as key staff members. During these years of the US domestic fight against Communists, Hoover remained largely quiescent about threats from New Right groups like the John Birch Society.

Gage includes a valuable chapter on the "Atomic Spies" and the Manhattan Project. These science moles recruited by the USSR managed to steal important weapons secrets, significantly advancing the Soviet ability to produce its own arsenal of city-busting nuclear warheads. Turning to the McCarthy era, although Hoover never cared much for Joe McCarthy, the Director used many of his red-scare tactics. Among his primary targets: homosexuals in the federal government. The hypocrisy of this stance is palpable, given the judgment by Gage (and most every other expert on the FBI) that Hoover and his long-time friend, Clyde Tolson, the No. 2 at the Bureau and, like Hoover, a lifetime bachelor, had been intimates for decades.<sup>2</sup> During the 1950s, COINTELPRO took shape as a means for discrediting Communist Party activities in the United States (however miniscule in membership that organization always was). The Bureau's tradecraft: "Manipulate, misinform, and disrupt the party in secret" (435). These methods were quietly accepted by

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ronald Kessler, *The Bureau: The Secret History of the FBI* (St. Martin's, 2002); Richard Power: *The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (NeFree Press, 1984); and Athan Theoharis and John Stuart Cox, *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition* (Temple University Press, 1988).

the Eisenhower administration, as the American Communist Party became a testing lab for subsequent FBI operations against less justifiable national security concerns.

As the 1960s arrived, Hoover continued to build the Bureau into a powerful bureaucracy, as he carried on his anti-Communist crusade and tiptoed through America's rising civil rights battles. In the process the FBI lost its way, Gage notes, "jettisoning" its "professional, apolitical ethos" (470). In presidents Lyndon B. Johnson, and especially his close friend, Richard Nixon, the FBI Director found muscular allies. First, though, he had to survive the Kennedy administration. He neutralized Kennedy by finding out about his extramarital relations, then holding this information over the president's head in what was evolving into a crafty means of blackmailing top politicians into subservience to the Bureau's needs.

As part of the FBI's COINTELPRO operations, Hoover turned this sleazy methodology against the nation's top religious leader as well, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom Hoover openly accused of being "the most notorious liar in the country" (605). The FBI sent to King's Atlanta office an anonymous letter, along with an embarrassing tape recording of King in various compromising situations with an array of women. The letter urged him to take his own life or see the contents disclosed to the public. "King, there is only one thing left for you to do," the letter read. "You know what it is. You have just 34 days." (Although Gage does not note the meaning of the "34 days" in this "suicide letter," it referred to the approaching ceremony in Sweden where King was to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.) King rebuffed this blackmail attempt by apologizing for his moral lapses as he disclosed the contents of the letter in a press conference. Assassins eliminated the Kennedy brothers, and King, from Hoover's further concern. Conspiratorialists notwithstanding, no evidence exists to link the FBI Director to these tragedies. It is true, though, that the FBI inquiries into the murders of the president and King were too hastily conducted, as were the Warren Commission and FBI probes into the President's death.<sup>3</sup>

With the outbreak of overt warfare by the United States against North Vietnam in the 1960s, Hoover had a new set of COINTELPRO targets: American college students who were opposed to the war and Black Power advocates who ratcheted up the struggle for civil rights. After almost three decades' worth of FBI anti-Communist themes, the Bureau Director now turned toward combating these "hate" groups, a term he applied to "black nationalist" organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Power movement (653). Hoover and presidential candidate Richard Nixon embraced a "law-and-order" slogan to advance this new agenda. COINTELPRO would soon run wild, as the Bureau set out to disrupt and neutralize the anti-war and civil rights movements. Hoover the Model Administrator was now Hoover the Architect of Fear and Paranoia.

In an effort to eradicate the New Left, President Nixon and Hoover entered into one of the most chilling episodes in American history: the Huston Plan. It was a startling journey into law-breaking by the Nixon Administration before Watergate. While Gage briefly addresses this subject, her narrative skims over some

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Edward J. Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* (Bantam: 1966).

of its more important aspects.<sup>4</sup> In 1969, the nation was going through one of its more turbulent times, with riots and protests across the land related to anti-war and civil rights activities. Nixon requested the preparation of a study regarding the degree of foreign Communist influence in stimulating the unrest. A young White House aide, Tom Charles Huston, had formerly been a right-leaning pro-war activist as a student at Indiana University and was tapped to prepare a report for Nixon about possible Communist involvement. He contacted the COINTELPRO head at the FBI, William C. Sullivan, one of Hoover's top men. Combining Sullivan's expertise and Huston's White House status, they prodded Hoover and the spy chiefs at the CIA, the National Security Agency (NSA), and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) to prepare a preliminary study.

Hoover was cautious about this venture, however. He had passed the mandatory retirement age of seventy (which had been waved by Johnson and Nixon) and could ill-afford a spy scandal should the questionable study leak to the media. He was "like the airplane ace who feels that sooner or later he's going to get shot down," a top NSA official once recalled to me.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Hoover, the other intelligence chiefs wanted more robust coverage, though not so much because of the domestic protests. They knew what the White House refused to acknowledge: these were not Communist-fueled demonstrations, but were rather homegrown—led by students and civil rights activists who were fed up with the war in Indochina and a stalled civil rights agenda. What the CIA, NSA, and DIA had in mind was something quite different; they wanted the FBI to resume its break-ins of foreign embassies in Washington, which offered a valuable source on the machinations of America's international adversaries. Now in a low-risk stage of his career, Hoover rejected the report the others had prepared.

Undeterred, Huston persevered. This time he made sure that Hoover understood that Nixon strongly wanted a report completed and carried out. The intelligence chiefs, *sans* Hoover, met further at the CIA and hammered out a final report in June of 1970, one that (using the phrasing favored by as historian Theodore White) allowed spy agencies in the IC to use wiretaps and other methods that would reach "all the way to every mailbox, every college campus, every telephone, every home" in America.<sup>6</sup> The other intelligence chiefs met with Hoover and he initially signed this Huston Plan (officially labeled the "Special Report"), but the FBI Director soon had second thoughts when he discovered that Huston had failed clear this project with Attorney General John Mitchell. Hoover met with the AG and the two made it clear to Nixon that the proposed domestic spy blueprint was unacceptable and would probably leak. Nixon backed away from the venture. Still in the cradle, the Huston Plan died.

Or so it seemed. The irony of these events was that, unbeknownst to Huston, the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, and the DIA were already engaged in the practices outlined in the Plan and would continue them even after the withdrawal of Nixon's his support for the Special Report. When the Church Committee held hearings

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<sup>4</sup> For details, see Loch K. Johnson, *America's Secret Power: The CIA in a Democratic Society* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 133-156.

<sup>5</sup> Loch K. Johnson, interview with Dr. Louis Tordella, National Security Agency, Ft. Meade, MD, 12 September 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore H. White, *Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 133.

on the Huston Plan in 1975, Huston had reached a rather different conclusion about its merits. In genuine remorse, he testified:

The risk was that you would get people who would be susceptible to political considerations as opposed to national security considerations. Or would construe political considerations to be national security considerations, to move from the kid with the bomb to the kid with a picket sign, and from the kid with the picket sign to the kid with the bumper sticker of the opposing candidate. And you just keep going down the line.<sup>7</sup>

It is hard to imagine Nixon or Hoover experiencing a similar epiphany. Hoover stopped the Plan because he didn't want to get caught; and Nixon went along with Hoover, not least because of the FBI Director's notorious political files on the peccadilloes of Washington politicians.

On the heels of the Huston Plan came the Media scandal, a break-in that occurred in that Pennsylvania township and an event, Gage argues, that "did more damage to Hoover's reputation than any single event in his lifetime" (701). On 8 March 1971, late at night, burglars, i.e. left-wing activists, stole more than a dozen Bureau files from offices in Media, many of which revealed details of COINTELPRO activities. With the cat out of the bag, Hoover finally shut down this disgraceful misuse of the FBI's secret powers. The Mr. Hyde side of Hoover had finally been revealed to the general public. Coupled with the Huston Plan revelations that trickled out into the newspapers, with the Media scandal the nation's venerable top G-Man witnessed his reputation enter into a sharp tailspin. A little more than a year later, Hoover was dead.

During his life in government, J. Edgar Hoover had constructed an impressive law enforcement agency, as is needed by any nation. Yet, in the end, given Hoover's COINTELPRO, the Huston Plan, and his shocking record of racism, Gage is correct to end her *magnum opus* with an emphasis on the FBI Director's "terrible cruelty" (732).

A few years after Hoover's death, I had been exposed to his cruelty when I served as the senior aide to Senator Frank Church (D, Idaho) during his probe into the US Intelligence Community from 1975–1976.<sup>8</sup> A

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Charles Huston, testimony, *Huston Plan Hearings*, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (the Church Committee), 94<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Gage writes that "the Church Committee hearings remain the single most significant inquiry ever undertaken by Congress into the conduct of the nation's intelligence agencies" (729), yet the only source she cites about the life of this panel is the work of Kathryn S. Olmsted, which criticizes the Committee for its lack of meaningful intelligence reform. See Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), and a critique of this study in Loch K. Johnson, *Bombs, Bugs, Drugs and Thugs: Intelligence and America's Quest for Security* (New York University Press, 2000), 105-108. For standard works on the Church Committee, see: Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: The Senate Intelligence Investigation* (University Press of Kentucky, 1985), republished as *A Season of Inquiry Revisited: The Church Committee Confronts America's Spy Agencies* (University Press of

fierce critic of the Vietnam War, Church was an honorable, hardworking individual who cared deeply about civil liberties at home and a less intrusive foreign policy abroad. He made the politically risky decision to take on US intelligence agencies out of a real sense of right and wrong.

One of the four staff Task Forces on the Church Committee focused on the FBI. Along with my position as Church's aide, I was asked by Church to participate in the panel's investigative work.

Church was especially interested in the Huston Plan, as well as COINTELPRO, but, as a foreign policy expert, he had the wisdom to largely turn over matters of domestic intelligence (including most of the hearings) to Senator Walter F. "Fritz" Mondale, the second-ranking Democrat of the panel. The popular Mondale was an expert on domestic intelligence and a hard-worker. Plus, as a former attorney general in his home state of Minnesota, he brought vital law enforcement experience to aspects of our inquiry. Although at Church's request my main investigative focus was on the CIA, I also prepared on his behalf the Committee's public hearing and final report on the Huston Plan, and assisted the staff's FBI task force track down details on COINTELPRO.

Near the end of the Church Committee inquiry in the winter of 1975, I boarded a flight from Washington to Toronto with a briefcase full of freshly declassified COINTELPRO documents. Out my window, snow drifted down from a cement-colored sky and, as the plane lifted into the air, I felt tense as I thought about the task before me. In Toronto, I knocked on a door in a high-rise apartment building and a bespectacled, elderly man with white hair smiled warmly and invited me inside. He was Anatol Rapoport, one of the world's greatest mathematicians, renowned for his pioneering work on game theory. As I sat across from him on a couch in his living room, excitement and sadness washed over me; excitement because I had long admired his work, sadness because I had to tell him about my own. I opened my briefcase and spread a sheaf of documents, several inches thick, onto his coffee table. These papers related to Rapoport as a COINTELPRO target. They made it clear that the FBI had spied on him and attempted to ruin his life.

"No holds were barred," William Sullivan, the FBI official in charge of COINTELPRO, admitted when I had questioned him under oath (as part of my Church Committee assignments) weeks earlier in a quiet corner of Logan International Airport in Boston. "We have similar techniques against Soviet agents. These same methods were brought home against any organization we targeted. We did not differentiate." I was astounded. How could anyone have gone along with this? I posed this question to Sullivan. "I was so inured

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Kansas, 2015); James Risen, *The Last Honest Man* (Little, Brown, 2023); Frederick A. O. Schwarz, Jr. and Aziz Z. Huq, *Unchecked and Unbalanced: Presidential Power in a Time of Terror* (New Press, 2007); and Frank J. Smist, Jr., *Congress Oversees the United States Intelligence Community, 1947-1989* (University of Tennessee Press, 1990). The Committee's chief counsel, F.A.O. Schwarz, viewed the FBI as the nation's "greatest problem," for it undermined American democracy at home with its COINTELPRO activities [interview, *The Harvard Gazette* (March 3, 2023): 1-5].

and accustomed to any damn thing I was told to do,” he replied, adding that he kept his resentment to himself. “I was married and trying to buy a house with a big mortgage and raise a family.”<sup>9</sup>

Rapoport had been born in Lozova, then part of the Russian Empire. His family, all secular Jews, fled religious persecution, coming to the United States when he was a child. He served in the US Air Force during World War II, then later became a highly regarded academic, settling into a post at the University of Michigan. It was there, from the FBI’s point of view, that Rapoport had committed his crime by staunchly and publicly opposing America’s war in Vietnam. In response, the Bureau conducted a clandestine disinformation campaign against him, sending anonymous letters to Michigan lawmakers and university officials that claimed he was a Communist. When he learned of the letters, Rapoport had no idea of who was behind them, but the reaction among recipients of the letters was swift. Lawmakers and university officials hounded Rapoport until he finally left his tenured position at Michigan. Personally wounded but eager to keep his academic reputation intact, he moved to Canada, where he continued his trailblazing research at the University of Toronto.<sup>10</sup> As I explained to Rapoport what the FBI had done, he slowly read the documents, turning one page after another without saying a word. Then he quietly wept.

This once mighty intellectual had become a shattered man, in the same manner that COINTELPRO had “damaged the lives of thousands of people” (731). The operations directed by J. Edgar Hoover against anti-war protesters, civil rights activists, and anyone else who disagreed with him must never be allowed to happen again in America’s democracy. Toward that end, Professor Gage’s study should be required reading for every citizen.

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<sup>9</sup> Loch K. Johnson, deposition with William S. Sullivan, Logan Airport, Boston, MA, 10 June 10, 1975. On this, see Loch K. Johnson, *Season of Inquiry: The Senate Intelligence Investigation* (University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> On the COINTELPRO victims, see Johnson, *Season of Inquiry*; specifically on Professor Rapoport, see Loch K. Johnson, “The Show Trial of the Century?” *New Lines Magazine*, 14 December 2022).

Response by Beverly Gage, Yale University

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Thanks to the reviewers, Erik Dahl, Christopher M. Elias, Melinda Haas, and by Loch K. Johnson, for such generous words—and for taking the time to read an 837-page book! One heartening aspect of publishing *G-Man* was the discovery that at least a few hardy souls, both inside and outside of academia, are still willing to devote dozens of hours to the reading of a single big fat history book. (The audiobook runs about 37 hours.) I especially appreciate the fact that the reviewers represent such varied subfields and specialties, from intelligence studies to the history of gender and sexuality. That range of interests speaks not only to Melissa Graves's talents in assembling an interesting panel of interlocutors, but to Hoover's sprawling, multifaceted life. For better or worse, he had a hand in an awful lot of what happened during the twentieth century.

It was this sense of scope and sweep that first attracted me to writing about Hoover. *G-Man* is a biography, focused on the life of an individual. But as several reviewers have noted, it is also an attempt to describe and reinterpret key elements of modern American political history through the lens of a single man. I was particularly interested in the ways that Hoover's story intersected with the subfields of American political development, policing and incarceration, intelligence and surveillance, and the study of American conservatism. The book frames him as something relatively unusual in US history: an ideological conservative who also happened to be a career government bureaucrat and steadfast believer in federal power.

Many of the reviews emphasize Hoover's role as an architect of the national security state, and rightly so. There is no understanding the evolution of American intelligence, political surveillance, and civil liberties without understanding Hoover. In writing about this aspect of Hoover's life, I built upon an invaluable and well-developed historical literature. The reviewers have discussed (and written) some of the key works. The Note on Sources at the end of *G-Man* identifies many others. Inevitably, as Loch Johnson points out, I also missed some useful scholarship. I appreciate his discussion of the literature on the Church Committee, which perhaps received less airtime than it deserved in *G-Man*. Though, in my defense, the Church Committee convened three years after Hoover's death—and the book had to end somewhere.

Part of what matters about the Church Committee is that it tried to hold the FBI accountable for decades of secret and sometimes illegal practices; indeed, to find out what those practices were. During Hoover's lifetime, no political figure of consequence dared to do that. *G-Man* describes many sources of Hoover's power and longevity in office, from his skill at public relations to his cagey interactions with eight different occupants of the White House. But some of his success was just dumb luck. When Hoover was appointed director in 1924, the Bureau was a small, struggling subset of the Justice Department, with few accomplishments but a lot of ill repute. Even the most far-sighted prognosticator could hardly see what it was going to become. Over the next several decades, Hoover transformed it into the FBI we know today, a hybrid law enforcement and intelligence agency, several times larger than the little Bureau he inherited. But the mechanisms of accountability did not keep up. During Hoover's lifetime, almost nobody outside of the Bureau had the right, or the ability, to access files that Hoover did not want revealed. Even the attorney general, Hoover's ostensible boss, usually had to plead and beg to find out what the Bureau was up to.

Hoover's agents were not part of the civil service and could be hired and fired at will. Hoover built an institution that was loyal to him above all else and designed to promote and defend his own priorities.

Several of the reviewers cite his story as a cautionary tale about how a cult of personality came to facilitate serious abuses of federal power. This lesson is worth heeding now more than ever. As they also note, however, there is more to Hoover than his fearsome shadowy image. During the decade-plus that I worked on this book, I was struck by how variegated his story really was and how the lessons we might draw from it changed with contemporary circumstances. At first, in the post-9/11 context, I thought issues of surveillance and secrecy might provide the most powerful link to the present. Then it seemed that the history of race and policing might be what people really cared about, including the still-shocking story of what Hoover and the FBI did to civil rights leader Martin Luther King. By 2016, Russian espionage was suddenly back in the news, after two decades in which it seemed like little more than a Cold War relic. Next came President Donald Trump's showdowns with the FBI and his firing of Director James Comey. During the Trump years, I became fascinated by the ways in which a changing political context led to a changing public assessment of the Bureau. At the moment of Hoover's death, conservatives hailed the FBI as the great guardian of the republic, while leftists and liberals expressed much greater skepticism. Today, that political equation is almost reversed.

Now student protest is once again on the front page and with it the question of how and when law enforcement ought to be involved. Hoover had some dangerous ideas on the subject. He believed that the FBI would be most effective not in facilitating arrests and public confrontations, but in conducting secret surveillance, infiltration, and disruption of student groups. Out of that conviction came some of the most notorious FBI actions of the 1960s, including the operations conducted under the auspices of COINTELPRO. Today's FBI is subject to far more expansive mechanisms of accountability than it was in Hoover's day, but it still has a relatively wide latitude to decide who seems dangerous and what to do about it. Hoover's example can't necessarily tell us what's happening out there in 2024. Perhaps, though, it can give us a sense of what to look for.

All of which is to say that Hoover's life covered a lot of ground; hence those 837 pages. As Christopher Elias notes, "Hoover's creation was multifaceted, and its impact reverberated—and continues to reverberate—beyond what the man himself may have imagined." I hope that the same proves true of *G-Man*, though not quite in the ways Hoover might have intended.