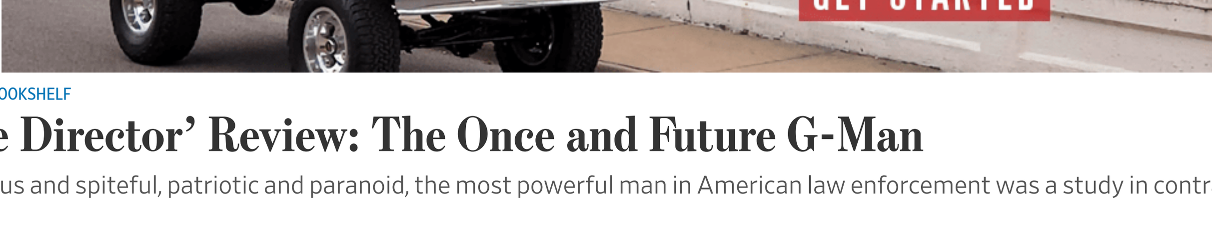

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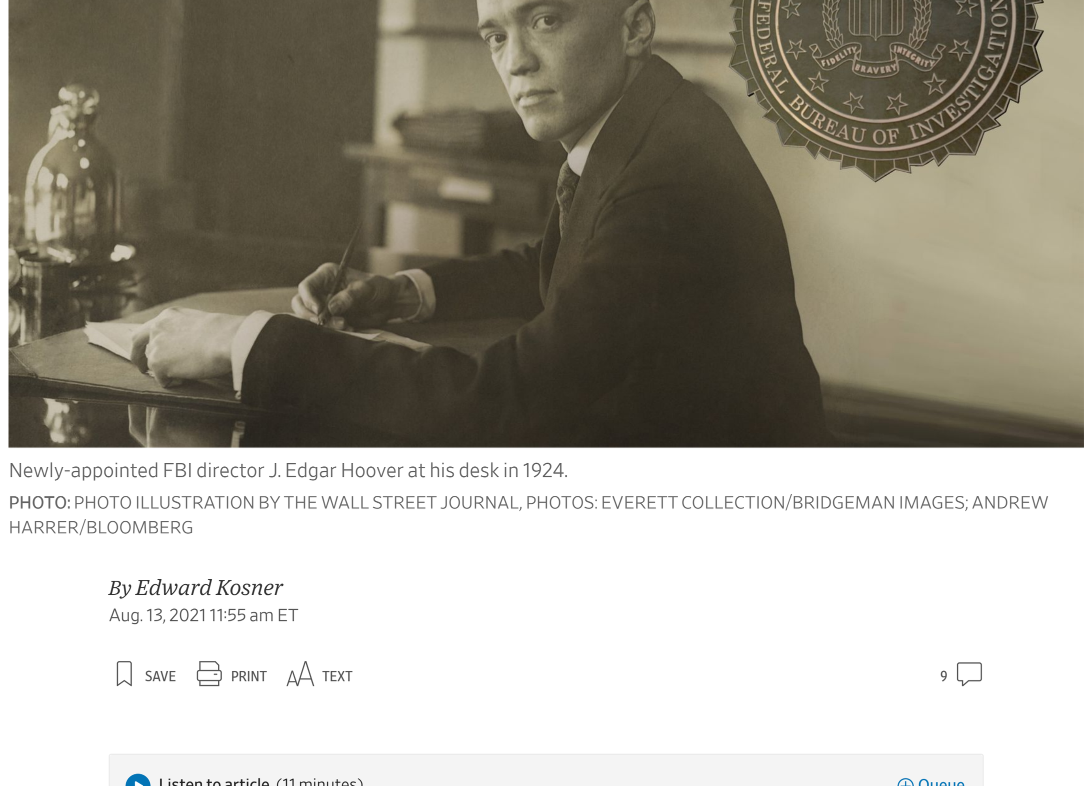
'The Director' Review: The Once and Future G-Man

Generous and spiteful, patriotic and paranoid, the most powerful man in American law enforcement was a study in contradiction.



Newly-appointed FBI director J. Edgar Hoover at his desk in 1924.
PHOTO: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, PHOTOS: EVERETT COLLECTION/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG

By Edward Kosner
Aug. 13, 2021 11:55 am ET

No one in American history wielded so much power for so long as J. Edgar Hoover. He created a peerless law-enforcement agency in his own unending image and served eight presidents, from Coolidge to Nixon, none of whom dared fire him although some yearned to see him gone. He ruled his FBI with an autocratic hand, micromanaged his national celebrity, and cozied up to café society at New York's Stork Club, especially gossip columnist Walter Winchell. He palled around with singer Frankie Laine and movie stars like Jimmy Stewart—he even chatted up Marilyn Monroe. He loved dogs and racehorses, "Gunsmoke" and "Rawhide," steak and potatoes and, in moderation, Jack Daniel's Black Label. But what was he really like?

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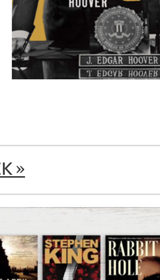

The Director: My Years Assisting J. Edgar Hoover
By Paul Letersky
Scribner, 320 pages

The shelves are laden with books about Hoover and his bureau—idolatrous, iconoclastic, one even claiming the imperious G-man liked to prance around after hours in full drag. But there has never been an account quite like "The Director: My Years Assisting J. Edgar Hoover," by Paul Letersky (with veteran journalist Gordon Dillow). In the mid-1960s the author, then in his early 20s, spent three years as a junior member of Hoover's tiny office staff and five more as a special agent, and he has mined his experience to draw a vivid, foibles-and-all portrait of the fabled scourge of gangsters, Klansmen and communists, who died in 1972 after 48 years on the job.

This is no hagiography. The fearsome director, he writes, was "kind, courteous, thoughtful, fearless, sometimes funny, a perfect gentleman, and a devout patriot" but also "vindictive, close-minded, hypercritical, a man of intense hatreds and eternal grudges, a man who in his sincere belief that he was protecting his country had repeatedly violated the principles of the Constitution on which that country was founded." In short, a "strange and remarkable," "fascinating and perplexing" creature.

Older Americans are marinated in the Hoover legend, thanks to the slick FBI publicity machine that touted his and the bureau's exploits in complaisant newspapers and magazines, movies like "The House on 92nd Street" and "The FBI Story," and the long-running ABC television series "The FBI," starring the handsome Efrem Zimbalist Jr. as a dashing special agent. For others, Hoover is a pug-nosed wraith from some long-gone America of machine-gun toting mobsters and commie spies. Mr. Letersky's riveting book will be fresh meat for people who think they know all about Hoover and an education for the rest.

Put in charge of the tiny, corrupt Bureau of Investigation in 1924, when he was not yet 30, Hoover invented the new Federal Bureau of Investigation and ruled it from its birth to his own death. He created the FBI crime lab with its forensic wizardry, the FBI academy to train agents and local and state police, the fingerprint records that ultimately held more than 200 million cards, and those "secret files" supposedly full of dirt on presidents, lesser pols, business titans and celebrities. He set weight, height and appearance standards for agents old and new, even including a ban on applicants with "pear-shaped" heads. Violation of any of Hoover's countless norms meant transfer to one of the bureau's punishment outposts, like Billings, Mont., or dismissal "with prejudice."

Of all the thousands of FBI personnel, only Hoover could write in blue ink. He obsessively scribbled in the margins of memos, reports and other documents. Once, the author reports, he wrote "Watch the borders!" on one memo—touching off panic in field offices near America's frontiers until someone realized that the boss was referring to narrow margins of the paper, not the Rio Grande.

J. Edgar Hoover ca. 1945.
PHOTO: MPI/GETTY IMAGES

Hoover's daily routine was equally idiosyncratic. He'd arrive promptly each morning to find his small staff—his devoted executive secretary, Helen Gandy, and a few junior aides like the author—awaiting him. Every time he made a move, one of them would have to call Hoover's 10 top deputies to announce "He's on his way up," "He's in the building," "He's left the building—lunch," "He's back in the building" and so on. Hoover liked to use paper clips his own way—slipping the smaller part of the clip over the front of pages. Each morning an aide had to make sure the clips were precisely arrayed for easy handling on his desk, which sat on a 4-inch-high platform so the director could look down on visitors seated before him. He had a glass desk ornament with an embedded two-faced coin—one side showing an elephant, the other a donkey. Before each of Hoover's meetings, the author had to make sure the image matching the guest's political affiliation was facing the visitor.

To his credit, Mr. Letersky doesn't let these tasty but essentially trivial tidbits crowd out his treatment of the big questions about Hoover and the FBI. These include the wire-tapping, bugging, infiltration, harassment and warrantless "bag-job" searches of anti-Vietnam War and women's-liberation activists and civil-rights leaders, the bare-knuckle tactics against critics and rivals, the inflation of statistics to win the bureau ever bigger budgets and other unsavory aspects of Hoover's long reign.

Hoover's animus toward the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is usually at the top of the list for the director's countless critics. Authorities knew that King's inner circle included two, perhaps three men connected to the American Communist Party and suspected they influenced the country's foremost civil-rights leader. The febrile anti-communist Hoover wasn't alone in that concern, the author writes—it was shared by President Kennedy and his brother Robert, the attorney general. King wouldn't part with the men, and RFK authorized wiretapping his home and office phones and bugging his hotel rooms when he traveled.

The results were scandalous—but not what they expected. The surveillance produced no evidence of red manipulation of the reverend, but rather raucous sexual romps with female companions, none of them named Coretta Scott King. Hoover, always prissy about sex, started calling King "a moral degenerate" and a "tomcat." One of Hoover's deputies sent the tape anonymously to King's home with a letter urging him to kill himself. The FBI leaked the recordings and sought to stigmatize the Nobel Prize winner by, among other things, urging universities not to award him honorary degrees.

A few months later, on Apr. 4, 1968, Mr. Letersky was working late at Hoover's office when he was handed a teletype from the Memphis field office: King had been shot and it was unknown if he'd survived. He called the boss at home. "I hope the son of a bitch doesn't die," rasped Hoover. "If he does, they'll make a martyr out of him." Still, the FBI ran one of the greatest manhunts in its history and captured King's assassin, James Earl Ray, who'd run away to London.

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The campaign against King was out of the Counter Intelligence Program playbook that Hoover's men developed to harass, disrupt, demoralize and destroy groups and individuals deemed national security risks. The Cointelpro approach seemed appropriate for attacking the mob, the Klan, communist spies and nihilistic Weather Underground bombers, but out of order for campus protesters, women's libbers and other "counterculture" activists. Critics were perhaps correct to call Hoover an abuser of civil liberties, but, Mr. Letersky writes, "at least he was an equal opportunity abuser."

(A decade earlier, I'd been the target of an FBI black-bag job. As a 22-year-old reporter for the then-liberal New York Post, I'd gone to Washington to do legwork for the paper's ambitious and critical series on Hoover and the FBI. Sixteen years later, I learned from a New York Times investigative reporter that the FBI had searched my hotel room looking for evidence that I'd been drinking heavily or having illicit sex, but had to conclude that I was "clean as a whistle." They'd even planned to plant drugs and tip off the local cops, but that was scotched by an FBI higher-up.)

Mr. Letersky covers all the other highs and lows of the Age of Hoover: He documents how the hundred or so staffers of the Crime Records Division tirelessly beat the PR drum for the director; how the value of recovered stolen cars and goods was hyped; how Hoover tangled with Harry Truman, LBJ and, especially, Richard Nixon, who tried to use the bureau in the Watergate coverup. It turns out Hoover's FBI kept files not only on his old chum Marilyn Monroe but on dozens of other celebrities and public figures, including Albert Einstein, Ernest Hemingway, Frank Sinatra, Walter Cronkite, Elvis Presley, Lucille Ball—even the Beatles and the Monkees.

But he credits Hoover for resisting—if fruitlessly—FDR's internment of Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor and for eventually curtailing warrantless wiretaps during the Cold War. He also offers a surprising glimpse of Hoover as not only an understanding boss but something of a soft touch with "hardship cases":

> Time and again I'd set up a meeting for an agent who'd come in and tell the Director that his wife had cancer and needed treatment at the Mayo Clinic, or that his daughter had a respiratory disease and needed to be in a drier climate—and within minutes after the meeting the agent's dark pink meeting-request card would be on my desk with the handwritten notation "Have Agent X transferred to Rochester," or "Have Agent Y transferred to Phoenix."

The author also deals straightforwardly with the incessant rumors about Hoover's relationship to tall, ruggedly handsome Clyde Tolson, his top deputy, fellow bachelor and inseparable companion. Tolson kept his own Washington flat, but he and Hoover had lunch and dinner together every night and shared hotel rooms on their frequent "inspection trips" of Florida and California, where they inspected the racetrack every afternoon. Snarky agents sometimes referred to them as "J. Edna and Clyde." Mr. Letersky says he doesn't know if Hoover was homosexual—he speculates he might have been asexual or impotent—but denies that he and Tolson were gay lovers, or that Hoover ever romped in drag. "J. Edgar Hoover was not a cross-dresser," he declares emphatically. "It's a preposterous story and a damned lie."

Tolson was part of Hoover's FBI "family," along with the petite but steely Helen Gandy — "always, always Miss Gandy"—his personal and professional Cerberus for more than half a century. Once, she dashed into Hoover's office and spread-eagled herself across the window behind him to shield him from a sniper she was sure she'd spotted directly across the street. She enjoyed tormenting her boss's ambitious top deputies—except Tolson—all angling for his job should he finally be toppled.

It was Miss Gandy who guarded the notorious "secret" files—six green four-drawer steel cabinets supposedly holding the dirt Hoover used to protect his turf and scare off his enemies. After Hoover died at 77, she lied to Congress, the author writes, that there was nothing much in those cabinets. Taking no chances, she'd already transferred those dealing with official matters to one of her boss's trusted deputies. The more personal ones? She'd torn each page in half and fed all the paper into a shredder, never to be seen again.

—Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

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