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PREFACE

My interest in history began as an exercise in imagination. As a high school student, I worked at a restaurant in Brookings, South Dakota, that occupied a former bank building on Main Avenue. One evening during a lull in my work, I noticed two yellowed newspaper pages framed and hanging in a dark corner of the restaurant. Those pages described a daring daylight robbery of the bank by a young couple, Bennie and Stella Mae Dickson. Just a few feet from where I stood, the Dicksons had entered the bank building with their weapons drawn and then escaped with more than $17,000 worth of cash and securities. From that point on, I was hooked on the idea of imagining how that robbery had played out. When I looked across Fourth Street at a small bar called Ray’s Corner, I would imagine Bennie Dickson drinking a soda there while he waited for the bank president to arrive early that morning in 1938. When I entered the building to go to work, I was passing through the doorway where Dickson had put his gun in the bank president’s back and forced his way in. The front of the restaurant was the lobby where Bennie and Stella Mae had waited, guns drawn, for the vault’s time lock to open. An old boardinghouse located a few blocks away on the corner of Third Street and Sixth Avenue still stood, marking the spot where the Dicksons had released their hostage, the bank president. And the intersection of Sixth Street and Medary Avenue, a few blocks farther from the bank, was where Stella Mae had scattered a bag of nails on the road to discourage anyone inclined to follow them.

As a college student at South Dakota State University in Brookings, I discovered more newspaper accounts of the robbery and the subsequent pursuit while doing research for a term paper. Years later, a graduate school assignment led me to request the Dicksons’ FBI file using the Freedom of Information Act. Their much-expanded story, including details of Bennie Dickson’s 1939 shooting by FBI agents in St. Louis, became my master’s thesis. The larger story of FBI public relations, with Bennie and Stella Mae serving as examples of how certain people and cases were used as props in
Bureau public relations campaigns, became the subject of my doctoral dissertation and a series of academic publications. I moved from faculty positions at Purdue University to the University of Oklahoma and then back home to South Dakota State before taking an administrative position at Wichita State University, always carrying an ever-larger collection of FBI files with me.

Along the way, dozens of people helped me hone my interests and maintain my focus, resulting in this exploration of FBI public relations and the journalists and publications the Bureau has identified as its friends and enemies. First of all, thanks must go to the FBI’s Freedom of Information/Privacy Act Section. As time has passed, the FOIPA staff have become more responsive and helpful. This sort of historical work, based on many thousands of documents, would not have been conceivable without their help. They do a remarkable job, given the difficulty of the task, the volume of requests, and the legal constraints that guide their work.

I am grateful to my mentors John Miller and Jerry Sweeney of South Dakota State University, Dan Berkowitz of the University of Iowa, Jeff Smith of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Fred Blevens of Florida International University, and Charles Self of the University of Oklahoma. The administration and my former colleagues at South Dakota State provided tremendous support. Grants that supported this project came from Purdue University, the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma, and the Graduate School at South Dakota State University.

Thanks to Michael Briggs, editor in chief, and the rest of the talented staff at the University Press of Kansas. I am grateful to reviewers Betty Houchin Winfield of the University of Missouri and Douglas Charles of Pennsylvania State University’s Allegheny Campus for the constructive and thoughtful critiques that greatly improved this manuscript.

I am a historian because my father, Charles Cecil, instilled in me an appreciation of the importance of the past. My mother, Mary, has always provided support and love through thick and thin. My older brother Dan has always rooted for me and believed in me. My sister Amy Cecil Holm patiently and carefully line-edited this manuscript and, to her great credit, even claimed to enjoy it, despite my inability to correctly employ a comma. Finally, my wife Jennifer Tiernan and our son Owen Cecil are sources of unending love and inspiration.
Hoover’s FBI and the Fourth Estate
Introduction

Before the Freedom of Information Act opened up J. Edgar Hoover's massive archive of meticulously indexed files to researchers in the 1970s, the FBI enjoyed a unique and lofty position in American society. Hoover and his agents were heroes to many Americans. Tales of the FBI's infallible laboratory and army of honest and professional agents became part of popular culture. Thanks to movies, television programs, books, magazines, and countless news reports, the FBI was widely considered to be an indispensable government agency. It was not always that way.

Created in the early 1900s despite a storm of controversy and fear of federal law enforcement, the early FBI, originally known as the Bureau of Investigation, quickly established itself as precisely the corrupt, out-of-control agency critics feared it would be. It was not until the 1930s that the FBI and Hoover, who was named director in 1924, began a three-decade period of cultural and jurisdictional growth. The arc of FBI power mirrored the arc of Hoover's own life. Scandal and corruption (some of it enabled by Hoover) had nearly sunk the agency by the time he took over as director in 1924. By the late 1930s, Hoover had calmed many critics' fears by removing political cronies, professionalizing the agency, and modernizing its law enforcement techniques. During the 1940s and 1950s, Hoover became a ferocious anti-communist, utilizing the awesome power of the FBI to enforce a specific vision of what it meant to be an American. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Hoover's vitality waned and critics became increasingly willing to attack the Bureau's activities.

Hoover and the FBI first emerged as cultural icons in the mid-1930s when the public became aware of the Bureau through its high-profile battles with enigmatic outlaws such as John Dillinger. Hoover personified the legendary G-man, and he and the Bureau became media darlings. Dramatic FBI cases became the fodder for newspaper and magazine stories, radio pro-
grams, and books. The 1940s and 1950s saw Hoover and the Bureau at their most powerful as they rooted out subversion (through both legal and illegal means) and maintained the loyal and outspoken support of a majority of Americans. As Hoover aged, though, his agency failed to shift with the times; the nation had moved beyond the director’s Victorian-era worldview, leaving him and the FBI out of step with society. The Bureau’s demonization of Hoover’s enemies on the Left became increasingly strident and anachronistic as leftists and their antiwar or pro–civil rights messages moved closer to the mainstream. In the years prior to Hoover’s death, public criticism of the FBI, once a dangerous and lonely undertaking, had become increasingly common. Hoover’s passing in 1972, after forty-eight years leading the FBI, eliminated the primary locus of the Bureau’s iconic power and control.

When historians and authors gained access to the FBI’s remarkable trove of information, the Hoover legend immediately began unraveling. A culture of secrecy that had shielded the Bureau from scrutiny for decades was removed, replaced with relative openness and limited public access to the information in the FBI files. Initial forays into the files allowed pioneering FBI scholars to sketch out the framework of what lay behind the Bureau’s public facade and create a timeline of Hoover’s many shameless illegalities and seemingly constant lesser offenses against civil liberties. That reality—of a lawless and uncontrolled Bureau that expended enormous amounts of time and resources policing political thought rather than investigating violations of federal law—confirmed more than six decades of critics’ complaints. Americans came to understand that Hoover, hired to clean up the Bureau, had ultimately transformed the FBI into an American secret police force, even as he convinced the public and many in the news media that he was a trustworthy defender of civil liberties.

It is interesting to consider how, in a nation so proud of its watchdog press, a high-profile federal agency managed to hide the reality of its activities for so long. The answer is as complex as the FBI’s decades-long deception, but it surely includes failings entrenched in the ideology of journalism and in readers’ and viewers’ often uncritical acceptance of news as truth.

For the news-consuming public, particularly during times of national crisis, Hoover’s stellar reputation likely fulfilled some inner need to believe that good people were working hard on their behalf and that better times lay ahead. For ordinary Americans, the question of how government news emerges from the messy process of journalism and public relations was not, and is not, a common topic of concern. Most of the time, news is a com-
modity consumed without great thought about how it has been produced. An examination of the requirements of news work and of the relationship between public relations messages and news content demonstrates that the production of news, because it involves human beings, is far from the objective ideal that has come to characterize journalists’ defense of their work. Instead, it is a human process that involves myriad choices of what to include, what to leave out, and how to express what is left as a simplified narrative that somehow reflects reality.

What about the journalistic canon of objectivity? As David T. Z. Mindich noted in his study of the development of objective journalism, it is surprising that “years after consciousness was complicated by Freud, observation was problematized by Einstein, perspective was challenged by Picasso, writing was deconstructed by Derrida, and ‘objectivity’ was abandoned by practically everyone outside newsrooms, ‘objectivity’ is still the style of journalism that our newspaper articles and broadcast reports are written in, or against.”

In fact, modern assertions of objective journalism are a twentieth-century phenomenon. Journalism in the early to middle 1800s was an openly and explicitly partisan or “biased” activity, as newspapers associated with particular individuals or political factions presented their own editorial worldviews. With the advent of the Penny Press in the 1830s, which relied on advertising rather than subscription revenues, newspapers filled their columns less with editorial matter, with its presumed potential to alienate advertisers, and more with relatively unbiased “news.” The arrival of the Associated Press in 1848 has sometimes been credited with signaling the rise of “objective” journalism. As journalism historian Michael Schudson suggested, however, the defensive journalistic objectivity that exists today did not begin to take shape until after World War I. In spite of minor challenges to the ideology of objectivity, it remains the core of the news paradigm today.

During most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the objective news paradigm has not been defined by a clear set of guidelines or ethical standards. Objective news is an ideal in which “bias” or a lack of objectivity is minimized. Yet even that watered-down definition, a far cry from the blank-slate arguments of an “objective” scientist, is problematic, according to scholar Robert A. Hackett: “The ideal of objectivity suggests that facts can be separated from opinion or value judgments, and that journalists can stand apart from the real-world events whose truth or meaning they transfer to the news audience by means of neutral language and competent reporting.
techniques.” In journalistic practice, objectivity has become a “strategic ritual,” a set of established routines that, if applied properly, allows journalists to protect themselves against charges of bias. In practice, a journalist’s concern about how to maintain objectivity has become less a philosophical question than a logistical one. The objectivity journalists speak of and the objectivity they practice may be very different. Though they often speak of “truth” and “reality,” in practice, journalists learn to gather and juxtapose competing truth claims and proclaim the result to be an “objective” representation.

Thus, the process of reporting the news is a product of journalists and sources understanding those established routines, as noted by Richard V. Erickson, Patricia M. Baranek, and Janet B. L. Chan in their study of crime news. “Staged performances in both the courtroom and newsroom are packaged as if they are based on more ‘natural’ events and therefore represent unmediated reality,” they wrote. “The realism helps them to constitute the truths of their discourses . . . as if theirs is not one way of seeing but the way of seeing.” The authors concluded that government news coverage, rather than providing a reflection of reality, often becomes “primarily a public conversation among journalists and government officials with others left to make only occasional utterances and to eavesdrop.” In his study of the media’s role in the emergence and disappearance of the New Left movement in the 1960s, Todd Gitlin asserted that when considered in the context of law enforcement, that closed conversation ostensibly based on interdependence actually overwhelmingly empowers the police: “When the power to define news is, in effect, turned over to the police, the media are serving to confirm the existing control mechanisms in society.” It is the conventions of journalism that create a power imbalance between media and government, Gitlin said. By adhering to those conventions and routines, journalists “systematically frame the news to be compatible with the main institutional arrangements of the society. Journalists thus sustain the dominant frames through the banal, everyday momentum of their routines.”

Those understandings of the nature of journalism correspond to contemporary accounts during Hoover’s early tenure as director of the FBI. In his 1937 book The Washington Correspondents, Leo Rosten observed reporters in order to describe how they produced and reproduced government officials’ “way of seeing” through their work routines. According to Rosten, the work of reporters covering government was a vocation of “professional reflexes and individual temperament” rather than any application of objectivity:
It is impossible to generalize about the extent to which news-coloring and news-suppression, based on personal obligations . . . thrive in the capital. It is no secret that some newspapermen are charged by the rest of the press corps as being sycophants to ambitious politicians on or off Capitol Hill; that others are won by the flattery of Representatives, Senators, or administrative officials who call them by their first names, slap them on the back, open the sacred portals of Washington Society to their wives, or ask them for advice on political matters.\footnote{11}

Rosten described a Washington culture in which the power in the relationship between reporter and source nearly always tipped in the source’s favor, with the scale of the power imbalance corresponding to the source’s perceived power and authority. “The Washington correspondent must . . . be careful to remain persona grata with his news sources. In the words of the trade, ‘he must keep his sources open,’” Rosten wrote. “He may do this by repaying his informants in the currency of journalism: he may play up a story which casts glory on a good news-source and play down a story which is embarrassing.”\footnote{12}

According to Rosten, the glorification of informative sources sometimes resulted in a reality so skewed that not even the reporter could parse the truth from the myth. “Reporters often come to believe in the fictional qualities which they assign public figures during that professional delirium which characterizes the daily meeting of deadlines,” he wrote.\footnote{13}

In that daily delirium, authoritative sources in government wield tremendous and even coercive power in the reporter-source relationship. In his 1973 observational study of news workers at the \textit{New York Times} and \textit{Washington Post}, Leon Sigal noted that authoritative sources utilized public relations strategies to maintain their dominance in the reporter-source relationship. Those strategies included going over reporters’ heads directly to editors and publishers, deriding coverage that dared stray from a predefined story line, and laboring to feed reporters a steady stream of information, thus assuring little time for careful analysis of any given story.\footnote{14}

The most powerful influence in the public relations practitioner’s toolbox, however, is the most obvious one: government sources can grant and withhold access to information as they please, and they often do so based on whether reporters remain compliant amplifiers of the agency’s message.\footnote{15} According to Bernard Roshco in his 1975 book \textit{Newsmaking}, “These potential news sources largely determine for themselves the degree to which they
will be publicly visible. They are usually free to release or withhold newsworthy information as they see fit, unless events draw them into public arenas where an ‘audience’ of reporters is stationed.”

The potency of that weapon is obvious when one considers the nature of journalists’ ambitions and notions of professionalism. According to sociologist Warren Breed, who observed reporters and editors as a subculture, journalists learn newsroom policy and standards of professionalism “by osmosis.” Through interaction with other journalists, a reporter “learns to anticipate what is expected of him so as to win rewards and avoid punishments.” Journalists quickly understand that gaining and maintaining access to authoritative sources equates to successful practice because it demonstrates an understanding of the necessities of journalism. “Knowing sources brings professional status,” according to sociologist Gaye Tuchman, based on her own newsroom observations. “The higher the status of sources and the greater the scope of their positions, the higher the status of reporters.” Journalists are hired to produce news stories. Authoritative sources provide information that is defined by journalists as newsworthy. Thus, maintaining access to those sources clearly demonstrates mastery of the craft to other journalists. With that mastery, however, comes the risk that access to information may suddenly be cut off, which leads to tremendous uncertainty and may potentially lead to ethical compromises. As Sigal noted, “The very routines and conventions that newsmen use to cope with uncertainty, though, are exploited by their sources either to insert information into the news or to propagandize.”

The structure of news “beats” likewise feeds the power imbalance. Reporters are essentially asked to embed themselves in an organization, becoming entirely reliant on that organization for access to information. Yet at the same time, reporters are somehow expected to remain connected to their news organization and abide by its policies and ethical principles. The difficulty of negotiating these two disparate positions makes it likely, according to Sigal, that a reporter may “absorb the perspectives of the senior officials he is covering” and become a press agent for the organization. Based on his observations, Sigal concluded that “the line between role-taking and absorption is a thin one indeed.”

According to Sigal, Hoover’s FBI relied on the absorption of friendly reporters into the Bureau’s culture and worldview. “Political support for the FBI and its autonomy within the Justice Department are due in no small measure to the favorable press it has won itself over the years.” In his 1966
study *The Press in Washington*, Ray Eldon Hiebert likewise highlighted FBI public relations and its assimilation of compliant reporters as a key to the Bureau’s lofty status in American society:

The FBI runs its own public relations office quite independently from the Department of Justice and sets many of its own policies. It has a fine public relations operation; the reputation of the FBI and its director is the best evidence of that. The FBI will answer questions from most newsmen. And, upon occasion, it will leak to those newsmen whom it regards as its friends. Its leaks often produce some of the hottest news stories in Washington, but you can bet your last dollar that such stories
appear where and when they do for certain specific reasons best known to the FBI. 25

While skillful public relations can tip the balance of power in the reporter-source relationship in the direction of the source, the FBI held even greater powers of persuasion based on its role as a federal investigative and law enforcement agency. During the early days of U.S. involvement in World War II, for example, President Roosevelt placed Hoover and the FBI in charge of federal censorship. Starting with that temporary authority, Hoover used the exigencies of war to expand his efforts to monitor and even investigate journalists, according to historian Betty Houchin Winfield. When columnists Drew Pearson and Robert S. Allen published information in their “Washington Merry-Go-Round” column that disclosed details of U.S. losses at Pearl Harbor, Hoover confronted Allen and urged White House officials to threaten the reporters. “In an unprecedented action, [White House official] Steve Early threatened to stop their column and bar their governmental access,” Winfield wrote. 26 For most organizations, the success of their public relations efforts hinges on the authority of the source and the salience of the information, but the FBI’s public relations efforts were enhanced by Hoover’s iconic authority and backed by the power and capabilities of a federal law enforcement and investigative agency.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, many studies of the FBI have explored what lay behind the Bureau’s public image. Broad FBI histories have exposed the Bureau’s activities over Hoover’s forty-eight-year tenure and created a clear timeline of events and of the director’s role in twentieth-century American history. Their judgments have been harsh. Historians Athan Theoharis and John Stuart Cox labeled Hoover’s tenure “the great American Inquisition” and concluded that “Hoover had more to do with undermining American constitutional guarantees than any political leader before or since.” 27 Historian Richard Gid Powers chronicled Hoover’s life and noted that the opening of FBI files to scholars has resulted in a case study of “excessive power run amuck.” According to Powers, Hoover’s tenure is now remembered for its illegal surveillance, secretive nature, and attacks on political opponents. “The rubble of his reputation buried the man himself even deeper, along with the forces that had produced him.” 28

Following these broad studies, scholars began to look more closely at specific aspects of the Bureau’s work, focusing on narrow time periods such as the outlaw era of the 1930s or the FBI’s work on specific topics such as ob-
scenity and freedom of expression. One very important activity that helped the FBI maintain its public image—public relations—has been mentioned in passing or alluded to generally in studies of Hoover’s Bureau. Scholars have identified something they refer to as “public relations” as an important weapon in Hoover’s arsenal, but the topic has not been studied in any great depth or with any thoughtful understanding of the nature or history of the practice of public relations. One aspect of public relations—media relations—was a day-to-day focus of the FBI. Although individual reporters’ interactions with the FBI have been studied as part of the larger story of the Bureau, there have been no broad studies of FBI public relations and, in particular, the Bureau’s relationships with prominent reporters, editors, publishers, broadcasters, and publications.

This book seeks to add detail and perspective to earlier studies by examining the FBI’s public relations tactics and its relationships with selected journalists and news publications. It is important, however, to understand the limitations of this study. Given both the volume of source material in the files and the fact that many files were destroyed by Bureau officials after Hoover’s death or as part of the agency’s ongoing document destruction program, no history of FBI public relations and journalism can ever be considered comprehensive. This caveat only underlines the importance of public relations to Hoover’s FBI. For this book, I reviewed more than 400 files of reporters, editors, publications, and others obtained using the Freedom of Information Act. The source materials for this study totaled approximately 200,000 pages detailing those relationships.

I made a conscious decision not to focus on journalists whose relationships with Hoover have already been explored as part of biographies or other studies. Thus, Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson are not covered extensively in this book. The chapters that follow focus instead on some lesser-known journalists whose work for or against the FBI has not been carefully considered elsewhere. Some of the journalists and publications covered here were chosen because of the remarkable length or depth of their relationships with the FBI. Others were selected because their work, while outside the mainstream, was considered significant enough to merit extensive monitoring or even active investigation by the FBI. The subjects were likewise chosen strategically to exemplify different portions of a period beginning with the creation of the FBI’s public relations division in the mid-1930s through Hoover’s death in 1972 and the cancellation of the Bureau’s most famous public relations showcase, its prime-time television program, in 1975. The
book’s chapters highlight relationships and controversies that typify the approximately forty-year period of the study. Finally, because of the study’s scope and its focus on the news media, I chose not to consider FBI educational campaigns, another key element of Bureau public relations under Hoover.

Chapter 1 explores the crisis of legitimacy created by public concerns about potential corruption and abuse of power in a federal police force. From its creation as the Bureau of Investigation in 1908, the FBI faced questions about its responsibility and utility. Critics’ concerns about corruption were proved correct by the outrageous overreach of the Palmer Raids, which rounded up thousands of alleged radicals and communists in 1919 and 1920. It was later discovered that those raids were based on faulty evidence, and nearly all those arrested were released. A young J. Edgar Hoover, assistant director in charge of the Bureau’s Radical Division, led the prosecution of the Palmer Raids. Yet for some reason, he was chosen to clean up the organization in 1924. From his perch at the center of the storm surrounding the Palmer Raids, Hoover well understood the importance of maintaining the Bureau’s legitimacy.

Chapter 2 reviews the history of public relations and the development of a public relations capability, including the creation of a replicable message template and the establishment of a publicity staff, in the Bureau. After a few tentative steps into the realm of publicity during the late 1920s, the Bureau became a key element of FDR’s New Deal war on crime in the mid-1930s. Two journalists, independent author Courtney Ryley Cooper and Washington Star editorial page editor Neil “Rex” Collier, collaborated with Hoover and his top lieutenants in creating a template for FBI news stories emphasizing responsibility and science and featuring Hoover as America’s careful and reliable top law enforcement officer. With the creation of the public relations–oriented Crime Records Section in 1935 and the establishment of clear lines of public communication authority, Hoover had both a public relations message and a management team to amplify and enforce it.

The remaining chapters explore the relationships between Hoover and several key enemies and friends in the news media over time. Iconoclastic liberal journalists George Seldes, I. F. Stone, Fred J. Cook, and James A. Wechsler figure prominently herein because they represent the Bureau’s preoccupation with its enemies in the media. Despite their relatively small circulations, liberal publications such as the PM newspaper, The Nation, and The New Republic were the focus of intensive FBI interest because of their
agenda-setting roles. Conservative stalwarts such as columnist George Sokolsky, broadcaster Fulton Lewis Jr., and Chicago Tribune Washington correspondent Walter Trohan represent prominent journalists with huge followings who became friends and defenders of the FBI. Other key FBI supporters, including Reader’s Digest editor Fulton Oursler and Memphis Commercial Appeal editor Jack Carley, represent a different kind of Bureau “friend.” They were willing to work both as “objective” journalists supporting the FBI and Hoover and as adjunct agents and confidential informants discreetly gathering information for the Bureau. Yet another group of journalists and authors, exemplified by two-time Pulitzer Prize–winning Associated Press newsmen Don Whitehead, uncritically helped the Bureau amplify its public relations message through FBI-authorized books. Finally, the Bureau’s foray into entertainment television in the 1960s and 1970s represents the ultimate expression of its public relations template, while journalists’ critical reactions demonstrate how American culture had shifted while Hoover and the FBI remained frozen in the G-man mold of the 1930s and 1940s.

FBI public relations activities, particularly its work with journalists, are significant because Hoover used public relations to create and maintain an iconic public facade that for decades hid the true nature of the Bureau’s work from the public. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, the FBI used public relations techniques and tactics to court and handle its friends in the news media. At the same time, the Bureau monitored and investigated its enemies and (with the help of friendly journalists) actively undermined those who were critical of the FBI. Over the course of several decades, and despite the efforts of critics and many leftist journalists and publications, public relations specialists inside the Bureau and friendly journalists outside managed to construct and maintain the facade of a legitimized FBI that most Americans believed was a protector of civil liberties.
Chapter 1

The FBI’s Ongoing Crisis of Legitimacy

On March 6, 1959, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover ordered his staff to investigate whether “subversive factors” in the personal lives of prominent news reporters, editors, and publishers might be at fault for news content that was “discrediting our American way of life.” Hoover’s request for a background review of key journalists came in the wake of a series of news stories attacking the FBI. Most notable was an in-depth critique of Bureau history by New York WorldTelegram and Sun rewrite man Fred J. Cook that filled the entire October 18, 1958, issue of the iconic liberal journal The Nation. Cook suggested that the history most Americans knew from news and entertainment media was suspect: “Is the FBI the perfect organization beyond reproach? Or is it a mixture, part heroic fact, part heroic myth which Americans should try to understand before they worship?”

These kinds of questions had loomed over the FBI from the beginning. But with the emergence of the iconic, all-powerful FBI atop a mountain of publicity in the 1930s, such questions became even more of a threat to the Bureau. Cook’s fifty-eight-page article deconstructed the mythical FBI of comic books, detective magazines, radio dramas, newspaper and magazine reports, and motion pictures—an image that Hoover’s public relations team had systematically built and maintained for two decades. According to the FBI’s carefully crafted public relations narrative, the Bureau was unquestionably a fair, restrained, scientific law enforcement agency and Hoover was an all-American figure above reproach. The FBI seldom made errors, according to Bureau-authored dogma; in fact, it was a vigilant and reliable protector of Americans’ civil liberties. Anyone who said otherwise, according to Bureau lore, was likely one of the “10,000 Public Enemies” operating from cells infesting every neighborhood. In the 1930s, those public enemies were the ruthless outlaws who roamed the American Midwest. Later in that decade and for the next thirty-plus years of Hoover’s tenure, the Bureau’s at-
tention turned to leftist politics, branding critics as communists or at least fellow travelers who were party to an enormous conspiracy to overthrow the U.S. government, starting with Hoover and the FBI.

Bureau critics created an ongoing crisis of legitimacy for the FBI as their attacks occasionally penetrated the army of Hoover defenders in the news media and reached the public. These criticisms focused on FBI crime-control tactics, Hoover’s god-like media persona, and the Bureau’s harassment of the political Left. It was hardly a fairly waged battle of ideas. Hoover controlled most of the public sphere through effective, ongoing public relations campaigns that seduced reporters, editors, political leaders, and, through popular entertainment, Middle America. Critics found themselves relegated to dissident publications, swimming against a tide of pro-Hoover, pro-FBI publicity that never seemed to ebb. Beginning with the war on crime in the early 1930s, FBI publicity constructed a public image of Hoover and his Bureau as icons of American innovation, good, and power. At a time when Americans were desperate for government to do something right, the FBI’s pursuit and elimination of John Dillinger and the other “Robin Hood” outlaws of the Midwest provided a compelling hook on which to hang the Bureau’s reputation. Hoover built on that narrative, erecting an FBI built not only on real law enforcement innovation but also on a manufactured public relations foundation that hid mistakes and excesses from public view for nearly forty years.

Cook’s criticism hit close to home. He was, by 1958, already well known to the FBI, and his lengthy critique—despite appearing in a small-circulation, niche publication—posed a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the federal law enforcement agency and even identified public relations as a factor in legitimizing Hoover’s Bureau:

Is there a danger in a highly concentrated national police power? Is there danger to civil liberties? To freedom of speech? To the administration of justice itself? These questions have been raised again and again; and always until now, they have been answered in the popular mind in favor of the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover and the agency with which his name is inseparably linked—because in effect he is the agency—have been placed by public sentiment upon a pedestal and made the center of a cult of hero worship.

Cook’s critique was specifically aimed at rebutting the 1956 authorized history of the Bureau, The FBI Story: A Report to the People, a best seller authored by two-time Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Don Whitehead. Re-
views of the book had helpfully reinforced the notion that Whitehead’s work represented the famous journalist’s earnest effort, as he said in his preface, to “learn the facts so I could report the inside story of the FBI.” In *Commentary* magazine, book reviewer and former Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas supported the objective reporting theme. “It comes close to being a eulogy of the man and the institution,” Thomas wrote. “It would, however, be very unfair to dismiss the book with this statement. Unquestionably it is an honest piece of work.”

In reality, Whitehead worked out of an office at the FBI’s Justice Department headquarters, and all the information he used to write the book was supplied by the FBI’s public relations division. He did not interview critics or cite any of the unflattering news reports or books that had appeared during Hoover’s tenure. Agents in the FBI’s Crime Records Division were allowed to read and edit the manuscript before publication. The result, unsurprisingly, was a reinforcement of the Bureau’s preferred themes of science, restraint, and the steady Hoover at the helm, told through a revisionist recap of familiar FBI success stories.

Whitehead’s “objective” book rewrote portions of FBI history, erasing, for example, Chicago Special Agent in Charge Melvin Purvis (who fell out of favor with Hoover) from the shooting of Dillinger—the Bureau’s defining early moment. The Bureau’s side project of routinely tapping telephones and planting bugs as part of its investigations into the loyalty of American citizens was explained as simply common sense, analogous to a businessman checking “every possible source for information as to the honesty and reliability of a prospective employee.” *The FBI Story* sold well because of its alleged objectivity—after all, it was written by an award-winning war correspondent—and because twenty years of unwaveringly positive publicity for Hoover and the FBI had made them icons of American culture. Whitehead’s best seller simply reinforced the publicly accepted, Bureau-authored canon.

Whitehead sold out his own journalistic credibility to the heroic history of the FBI. Hoover counted on the public’s logical conclusion that a famed, objective journalist had reviewed the evidence and verified the Bureau’s history as it had always been told. Whitehead’s book flew off the shelves, and in 1959 it became the basis for a popular motion picture, also titled *The FBI Story*, starring Jimmy Stewart. And when Hoover moved the FBI story into television in 1965, carefully selected scriptwriters were provided copies of Whitehead’s book, the popularly accepted, journalist-vetted story of the genesis of the FBI.
Cook’s 1958 reporting in The Nation systematically dismantled Whitehead’s FBI Story, exposing the Bureau’s flaws and errors along with its secret: a twenty-year history of surveilling law-abiding American citizens who happened not to share Hoover’s ideology and worldview. Cook raised questions about such revered Bureau myths as the origin of the “G-man” moniker and the shooting of Dillinger. Cook even offered evidence that the efficiency and effectiveness of the FBI laboratory and fingerprint identification sections, though laudable, had been overstated. In countering Whitehead’s version of FBI history, Cook undermined the carefully crafted signifiers of the Bureau’s preferred self-image and painted a picture of the out-of-control secret police force feared by so many Americans.

For Hoover, who had carefully tended the Bureau’s image for decades, such direct challenges could not go unanswered, particularly when they were part of a flurry of criticism. Cook’s was just the first of several reports in 1958 and 1959 that found a foothold among Bureau critics. Appearing on television on May 4, 1958, industrialist Cyrus Eaton declared that the FBI’s growth in power and authority represented an alarming threat to civil liberties. Of the FBI, Eaton told Mike Wallace: “I think it’s had a tremendous buildup. It has enjoyed wonderful propaganda and sold itself in a marvelous way. But I always worry when I see a nation feel that it is coming to greatness through the activities of its policemen. And the FBI is just one of scores of agencies in the United States engaged in investigating, in snooping, in informing, in creeping up on people.”

Editor James A. Wechsler of the New York Post followed Eaton’s broadside with a critical series on Hoover and the FBI that appeared in late 1958. FBI officials dismissed Wechsler and his staff as “iconoclastic liberals” who “deliberately seek to break or destroy the highly favorable images which people have of men and women. In short, they would destroy idols of the people.” These attacks, along with Cook’s article in The Nation, convinced the FBI that a coordinated campaign was under way to undermine the agency’s legitimacy. Two months after Cook’s article was published, assistant director William Sullivan, in a stunningly paranoid memorandum to another top FBI official, declared that the criticisms constitute, “in reality, a concerted attack on the internal security of the United States.” Sullivan’s determination, not coincidentally, fit with Hoover’s overarching thesis that any criticism of the FBI was a threat to the U.S. government. Like most Bureau officials of the Hoover era, Sullivan had internalized the director’s narrow conceptualization of acceptable political thought and speech.
Questions about the FBI’s legitimate role in society predated Hoover’s tenure and can be traced to the organization’s founding as the Bureau of Investigation. The questions that shaped Hoover’s administration of the FBI are, in fact, as old as the United States itself and relate to a fundamental dispute over limits on federal power and authority. America is the product of a war for independence that was sold to citizens as a necessary response to tyranny. Fearing the arbitrary nature of centralized authority after gaining independence, the founding fathers created a system of government that placed most powers in the hands of the states and severely limited the power of the national government. Under the Articles of Confederation, the single house of Congress required unanimity to pass laws. No single currency was recognized. There was no authority to create armed forces or to levy federal taxes.

This decentralized government was the natural result of a war against perceived tyranny. It was also a dismal failure. The anemic Articles of Confederation led the founding fathers to author a new constitution, the ratification of which led to a battle over the extent of federal powers. Amendments protecting individual liberties were packaged as the Bill of Rights. Thomas Jefferson’s anti-Federalists, fearing the corrupting potential of centralized government power, prevailed, and the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution. From the Bank of the United States crisis in the 1820s to the Civil War to the health care debate of the early twenty-first century, disputes over the bounds of federal power and the rights of individuals have continued to be a staple of American public discourse. Americans have always had a tendency to fear concentrated federal authority. Thus, many Americans in the early twentieth century questioned the legitimacy and trustworthiness of a federal police force.

According to mass communication scholars, organizations whose output is compatible with society’s value patterns—specifically, organizations that demonstrate responsibility and utility—are generally considered legitimate by the public. Over time, such organizations may lessen the likelihood of criticism based on perceptions of power imbalance between the institution and individuals in society. Legitimation strategies often employ public relations messages to reduce concerns about the irresponsible exercise of arbitrary power.

The Justice Department’s investigative bureau faced questions about its legitimacy from its inception in the first decade of the twentieth century. The creation of the Bureau of Investigation in 1908 came about only after a
public controversy over the abuse of power that could result from centralized police authority. Concerns about President Theodore Roosevelt’s accrual of executive power—in particular, a controversy surrounding the assignment of Secret Service agents to what opponents viewed as politically inspired investigations—led to a congressional battle over the Justice Department’s need for its own investigative force. The issue became a political circus as the players in the drama sought to publicly adjudicate the dispute. Ultimately, it became clear that the attorney general had the power to order the creation of an investigative bureau, and on March 16, 1909, with the stroke of a pen, the Justice Department’s Bureau of Investigation (which had been operating with discretionary funds and without congressional authorization since 1908) was founded, despite considerable public opposition.13

During its first decade, the Bureau of Investigation did everything possible to justify public concerns about its potential for corruption and the arbitrary exercise of power. According to historian Richard Gid Powers, the Bureau of Investigation veered from investigating major crimes against the nation “to a new role as the nation’s agent of vengeance against whoever
might be the public enemy of the day.” The Bureau could not seem to get out of its own way.

The Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920 confirmed public fears of the frightening potential of a federal police force. The raids, named after Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, targeted anarchists and communists. Thousands of alleged radicals were rounded up, and most were later released. In the months after the raids, critics in the press and Congress highlighted the hearsay nature of much of the evidence against some of those arrested and the complete lack of evidence against others. In addition, the Bureau failed to obtain legitimate arrest warrants in many instances. In short, the Palmer Raids confirmed the potential for federal law enforcement to place itself above the law.

At first, the raids were portrayed as an appropriate response to a legitimate threat. The appeal of anarchism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a solution to perceived injustices lay in its obliteration of centralized authority, which adherents believed would spark the restoration of economic and social fairness. Anarchy, colorfully described by one historian as one of the “great dumb forces loosed upon the world,” advocated an end to all governmental institutions and the ascendancy of individual liberties. Anarchism was a reaction to the massive and expanding gap between rich and poor in America. Workers were driven to be more productive, but when their increased productivity was not rewarded with wage hikes, corporate wealth and power and the perceived greed of individual barons of industry stoked widespread frustration beginning in the 1870s. Industrial workers felt trapped in the vortex of capitalism out of control.

The first wave of the anarchist movement in the United States, led by journalist Albert R. Parsons, was crushed in the wake of the Haymarket tragedy in 1886. The movement had been growing rapidly thanks to the mushrooming inequity created by the Industrial Revolution, along with the hardship of the economic depression of the 1880s. On May 4, 1886, Parsons and several others spoke at a rally in Haymarket Square in Chicago. After they left, a bomb was thrown at police, and in the ensuing melee, seven police officers and at least four civilians were killed. A nationwide, media-fanned, anti-red hysteria followed. Chicago officials, under tremendous pressure to punish the anarchists for the violence, indicted Parsons and seven others and charged them with murdering the police officers. Not surprisingly, given the media frenzy surrounding the case, the anarchists were found guilty of conspiring to incite the bombing, even though they had not
been present at the time of the confrontation. Four of those convicted, including Parsons, were hanged, and the anarchist movement withered until it was revived in the late 1890s. In 1901, President William McKinley was murdered by a presumed anarchist, cementing the violent and revolutionary reputation of the movement. Russia's Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 added a new set of “red” radicals—socialists and communists—to the mix. A series of anarchist bombings in 1917 aroused widespread fear of a growing and threatening radical subversive movement in America.

As exemplified by the anarchists, a frightening tradition of radical violence was already well established as an enemy within when America's entry into the Great War in 1917 formalized the enemy abroad. The war effort included a dramatic expansion of federal power and a corresponding crackdown on dissent. The United States was hardly united in its certainty that entering the war was a necessary and wise decision. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson won reelection based on a campaign slogan that stated, “He kept us out of war.” One of the first executive orders Wilson signed after U.S. entry into the war created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), a government publicity agency charged with fostering national unity, encouraging support of the war, and, importantly, encouraging citizens to purchase war bonds to finance expensive overseas combat operations.

Even as the CPI was created to encourage national unity, Wilson took steps to crush dissent within the United States. In an address to Congress on April 2, 1917, Wilson evangelized suspicion of dissenters when he declared that overseas enemies had “filled our unsuspecting communities and even our offices of government with spies and set criminal intrigues everywhere afoot against our national unity of counsel, our peace within and without, our industries and our commerce.” To address that threat, Wilson authorized the Department of Justice to investigate, arrest, and imprison any noncitizen found to be disloyal.

John Edgar Hoover came of age during an era of growing radicalism in America. Hoover was born in 1895 and lived all his life in Washington, D.C. His father and grandfather worked for the federal government. Hoover's father, Dickerson Hoover, suffered from depression and ultimately lost his job as a federal cartographer and was institutionalized. As a child and a teenager, Hoover leaned on his mother, Annie, for support. He lived with her in his childhood home six blocks southeast of the Capitol until she died in 1938,
when Edgar was forty-three years old. In high school, Hoover led his school’s cadet corps and debating squad. While studying law at George Washington University, he began his career in the federal government as a clerk at the Library of Congress, where he gained an appreciation for the institution’s intricate system of indexing its holdings. After earning his law degree, Hoover joined the Department of Justice in July 1917, three months after the United States entered the Great War. A few months later, the twenty-three-year-old, newly credentialed Justice Department attorney became head of the Enemy Alien Registration Section. Throughout the war, Hoover led his section in compiling an extensive index of individuals deemed to be threats to national security.18

Labor and social unrest characterized the years after the Great War, as 4 million U.S. soldiers and 9 million war production workers competed for
jobs in a faltering economy. The majority of U.S. workers labored twelve hours a day, six days a week, earning just pennies per hour. Anarchists, their ranks revived by the economic turmoil of the postwar era, turned to violence, hoping to ignite a workers’ revolution to overthrow the U.S. government. Members of the anarchist movement punctuated those desires with a series of sensational bombings, including an attack on Palmer’s home.

At about 11:15 p.m. on June 2, 1919, a man carrying a suitcase ran toward the front of Palmer’s house on R Street in Washington, D.C. He tripped and fell, setting off a massive explosion that shattered the front of the house and obliterated the bomber. Palmer and his family escaped unharmed, except for ringing ears and a lost sense of security. Eight other bombs exploded around the country that night, all aimed at men who had urged or led crackdowns on alleged radicals. Two people died. Prior to the bombings, Palmer, an avowed progressive believer in Wilson’s New Democracy programs, had eased the Justice Department’s campaign against radicals, releasing enemy aliens and even suggesting that Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene B. Debs be granted clemency (he was not). During his first three months in office, some members of Congress condemned Palmer for failing to address the radical threat. After the attack on his home and family, though, Palmer joined the growing antiradical backlash. He turned to the bright, young, ambitious Hoover to lead the Justice Department’s expanded antiradical efforts.

On January 2, 1920, Bureau raids directed by Hoover resulted in the arrest of approximately 10,000 alleged communists, anarchists, pacifists, socialists, and labor activists across the country. Agents in the field were instructed to coordinate their work with Hoover and were forbidden to notify local authorities. Two-thirds of those detained were immediately released, with the remaining 3,500 held for deportation hearings. In the end, only 556 were deported. Among the foreign-born American citizens deported in the wake of the raids were famed anarchist Emma Goldman and her lover Alexander Berkman. Wisconsin congressman Victor Berger, re-elected as a socialist in 1918, was convicted of sedition and sent to prison.

The brutal tactics and the nationwide extent of the raids, punctuated by the few prosecutions that resulted, raised questions in Congress and the press about whether a federal law enforcement agency could remain uncorrupted in nature and restrained in its practices. Congressional hearings were called, and the Senate Judiciary Committee denounced the performance of the Bureau of Investigation and the Justice Department as “the lawless acts of a
Editors of *The New Republic* described the raids as “probably the most violent, lawless and inhumane proceeding which any department of the federal government has committed since the founding of the Republic.”\(^{22}\) In his 1958 article, Cook referred to the raids as an indiscriminate “dragnet.”\(^{23}\)

As details of the raids emerged and public sentiment turned against him, Palmer was called before the Senate Judiciary Committee on January 19, 1921, to explain the necessity of the arrests and defend the tactics employed. When asked for specific information about the number of search warrants issued, Palmer deferred to his General Intelligence Division chief, Hoover, who was seated beside him at the hearing: “If you would like to ask Mr. Hoover, who was in charge of this matter, he can tell you.”\(^{24}\) It was one of the few times that Hoover’s involvement in leading the investigations that led to the creation of 450,000 security index cards on alleged radicals, directing the production of arrest and search warrants, and directing the raids themselves was publicly acknowledged. Those facts would later be added to the long list of inconvenient facts Hoover erased from his FBI and personal histories.

By 1923, the Justice Department and its Bureau of Investigation, tarnished by the fallout from the Palmer Raids and by ongoing allegations of corruption, were referred to in the media as “The Department of Easy Virtue” and “The Department of Hysteria and Intolerance.”\(^{25}\) *The New York Times* recalled that controversy in a 1940 article, citing it as a source of the mounting criticism of the pre–World War II FBI: “There have been times in years past when the practices of the FBI have been attacked. Twenty years ago, for instance, before the bureau assumed its present status, it was denounced by many prominent officials and attorneys including the present Chief Justice [Charles Evans] Hughes and Justice [Felix] Frankfurter, as well as by the Senate Judiciary Committees for the so-called Palmer Raids of 1920.”\(^{26}\)

The Bureau of Investigation’s involvement in scandals did not end with the Palmer Raids. In 1923, Montana’s Democratic senators Burton Wheeler and Thomas Walsh initiated an investigation of Interior Secretary Albert Fall’s decision to forgo bidding and to issue leases for oil reserves in Teapot Dome, Wyoming, and Elk Hills, California, to two prominent businessmen. In response to the Senate investigation, the director of the Bureau of Investigation, William J. Burns, secretly ordered his agents to uncover damaging information about Wheeler. In the course of their investigation of Senator Wheeler, agents tapped phones, opened mail, and broke into offices and homes. When a congressional committee learned of the investigation and its
tactics, and found evidence of other investigations of members of Congress, President Calvin Coolidge ordered Burns and his boss, Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty, to resign. Critics’ fears that the Bureau would inevitably transform into a secret police force had been confirmed, and the agency’s reputation for overreaching and corruption was further established.

The Bureau of Investigation needed new leadership. In a May 1924 statement, Attorney General Harlan Fiske Stone issued what a 1976 congressional committee investigating FBI excesses labeled the “Stone Standard.” In his statement, Stone warned of the dangers of a secret police system. “The Bureau of Investigation is not concerned with political or other opinions of individuals,” Stone wrote. “It is only concerned with their conduct and then only with such conduct as is forbidden by the laws of the United States. When a police system passes beyond those limits, it is dangerous to the proper institution of justice and to human liberty, which should be our first concern to cherish. Within them it should rightly be a terror to the wrong-doer.” According to the Stone Standard, the corruption and political spying of the early Bureau of Investigation raised clear questions about the agency’s legitimacy, which could be restored only through new leadership and a new direction.
The next day, in what now appears to be a confounding move, the newly appointed Stone, an outspoken critic of the Palmer Raids a few years earlier, addressed those questions of legitimacy by naming twenty-nine-year-old Hoover—one of the engineers of the Justice Department's campaign against radicalism—to lead the entire Bureau of Investigation. Hoover’s appointment as interim director was accompanied by the attorney general’s statement reinforcing the Stone Standard and assuring the public that the Bureau’s power would be held in check and the agency’s integrity would be a top priority. Under its new leadership, Stone reiterated, the Bureau would not be “concerned with political or other opinions of individuals, only with their conduct and only with such conduct as is forbidden by the laws of the United States.”

The story of Hoover’s appointment as interim director was captured in the agency’s history, retold in countless media reports, and even taught as part of the curriculum at the FBI’s police academies. According to Whitehead’s authorized history, Hoover entered Stone’s office and was told, “Young man, I want you to be Acting Director of the Bureau of Investigation.” According to Whitehead, Hoover “knew that Stone did not hold him responsible for the policies, mistakes and corrupt actions of those who had directed the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Investigation in the past.” Hoover’s role in leading the Palmer Raids apparently did not come up.

According to Hoover’s version of events, he then issued a series of conditions for Stone to agree to, including isolating the Bureau from politics and establishing a system of merit-based appointments and promotions. According to Kenneth Ackerman, a biographer of Hoover’s early career, the FBI version of Hoover’s appointment was a lie. “In fact, it was Edgar’s favorite kind of lie, the elegant silence of a kept secret,” Ackerman wrote. “The conception was not immaculate at all. In convincing Harlan Stone to give him the acting job that day in 1924, bright, fresh-faced, earnest young J. Edgar Hoover had cheated the older man.” In fact, Ackerman stated that, as Palmer had suggested in his congressional testimony about the raids, Hoover had “argued the most strident views; demanding more arrests, higher bail, fewer rights for detainees, and a tougher line against anyone who stood in his way.” Yet somehow, Stone labored under the impression that Hoover had played a minor role in the raids. The symbolism of Hoover’s entry into the directorship, under conditions that emphasized responsibility and incorruptibility, became an oft-repeated fable in the director’s legend.

During Hoover’s short tenure as interim director, the American Civil Lib-
The FBI’s Ongoing Crisis of Legitimacy

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a report challenging the legitimacy of the Bureau of Investigation, which, it charged, had become a “secret police system of a political character.” The fifteen-page ACLU pamphlet, titled *The Nationwide Spy System Centering in the Department of Justice*, accused the Bureau of a wide variety of excesses ranging from burglary to political blacklisting. Stone forwarded the pamphlet to Hoover for comment. Hoover issued what eventually became a boilerplate reply to such criticism, a staple in asserting the Bureau’s legitimacy. The Bureau only investigated violations of federal laws, Hoover said. He denied all charges of burglary and wiretapping and accused the ACLU of acting out of communist influence. This pattern of claiming limited jurisdiction, denying charges outright, and ascribing subversive motives to accusers would be heard again and again throughout Hoover’s forty-eight-year tenure.

Having prepared his boss, Hoover, Stone, and ACLU founder and executive director Roger Baldwin met. At their meeting, Hoover denied responsibility for the Palmer Raids and pledged to shut down the General Intelligence Division (GID). The first claim was a lie. The second became one when Hoover removed the GID from his organizational chart but kept its files and indices and continued to add individuals and information to them. Nonetheless, both Stone and Baldwin believed him, and four months later, on December 10, 1924, the attorney general removed Hoover’s “interim” label.

To his credit, Hoover, the consummate bureaucrat, spent his early tenure adjusting the agency’s bureaucratic structure and steering it clear of the temptation to enforce Prohibition. He established the executive conference, initially made up of division chiefs, as a policy advisory group. He made the special agents in charge (SACs) around the country, who had enjoyed tremendous autonomy under prior directors, answerable directly to Washington. He initiated inspection teams to monitor compliance with his new rules. And he standardized a new filing and indexing system. He also established dress and personal conduct codes. Hoover created a set of standards and procedures—reflecting his own work habits and personal principles—where none had existed before. The Bureau was no longer corrupt, but it remained a bureaucratic backwater, a little-known investigative agency with a small force of agents who did not carry weapons or make arrests.

The Great Depression and the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt promised a new deal for the American people and a new role for
Hoover’s FBI. Beginning in 1933, Roosevelt’s New Deal programs centralized economic power within the federal government, as well as emphasizing centralized federal law enforcement and public relations. At about the same time, a number of midwestern outlaws began a crime spree throughout the middle third of the United States. Out-of-the-way places suddenly became household names. Crown Point, Indiana, site of John Dillinger’s jailbreak, and Manitowosh Waters, Wisconsin, site of the Little Bohemia resort where Dillinger’s gang shot it out with FBI agents, captured headlines as the war on crime began. Dillinger’s fame became Hoover’s after FBI agents, led by SAC Melvin Purvis, gunned the outlaw down outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago in July 1934. The FBI’s pursuit of midwestern outlaws displayed its strengths, providing a clearinghouse of information that enabled a more strategic and nationwide approach to law enforcement. As the bodies of outlaws and FBI agents began to pile up, however, some critical voices again began to warn of corruption and lack of accountability. In November 1934, for example, Harper’s published an article by attorney William Seagle headlined, “The American National Police: The Dangers of Federal Crime Control.” Seagle, who also authored a book about ludicrous and outdated laws and went on to become a trial examiner for the National Labor Relations Board, decried the New Deal expansion of the Bureau of Investigation’s jurisdiction in 1934.

The first expansion of the Bureau’s limited jurisdiction had been passed by Congress in 1910, when the White Slave Traffic Act (the Mann Act) made prostitution a national crime. In 1919, Bureau of Investigation jurisdiction expanded again with passage of the Dyer Act, which outlawed the interstate transportation of stolen motor vehicles. Bureau jurisdiction remained static throughout the Harding and Coolidge administrations. Under Herbert Hoover, the Bureau gained responsibility for gathering crime statistics and maintaining a national fingerprint repository. The publicity surrounding the kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh’s infant son in 1932 led Congress to extend the Bureau’s authority to cover kidnapping with passage of the so-called Lindbergh Law.

Public fascination with outlaws such as Dillinger and the Barker-Karpis gang in 1933 and 1934, though, was the driving force behind a dramatic expansion of Bureau jurisdiction under Roosevelt. Attorney General Homer S. Cummings declared that the nation was “engaged in a war that threatens the safety of our country.” In May and June 1934, Congress passed nine bills dramatically expanding the Bureau’s jurisdiction. Agents were authorized to
carry firearms and make arrests. The Bureau became responsible for fugitive felons. The Lindbergh Law was expanded to automatically involve the Bureau in all kidnappings after seven days. The Dyer Act was expanded to involve the Bureau in any theft of property valued at more than $5,000. The robbery of any bank covered by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation became a federal crime.\textsuperscript{42} Overnight, the Bureau was recast as a true police organization with broad jurisdiction. The legal authority for the Bureau’s investigation of subversive activities was also enhanced in 1934 when Roosevelt ordered Hoover to investigate American fascism, an order he expanded to include communism and other subversive activities two years later.\textsuperscript{43}

In his critique of the expansion of federal police power, Seagle opened with a simple question: “How many persons know that there is at this moment a national police force, or, if they know it, realize what this implies?”\textsuperscript{44} He then alluded to the corruption of the Department of Easy Virtues before asserting that federal law enforcement placed basic civil liberties at risk. “Accompanying the unprecedented expansion of Federal power, and a Fascist spirit in the world at large, the assault upon local criminal jurisdiction betokens, to say the least, a danger of widespread assault upon civil liberties,” Seagle wrote.\textsuperscript{45} Near the end of his ten-page assault on federal law enforcement, Seagle reminded readers of Hoover’s role in the Palmer Raids. “Indeed the present head of the Division of Investigations in the Department of Justice, J. Edgar Hoover, was an agent in the Department in the heyday of the Palmer red-baiting era, who, even after the Red scare had somewhat abated, devotedly spent a good deal of his time in shadowing harmless souls in the national capital.”\textsuperscript{46}

Meanwhile, Hoover was moving to counter challenges like those offered by Seagle. After the stories about Dillinger and the capture or killing of several other famed outlaws had faded, Hoover created a public relations–oriented Crime Records Section (later renamed the Crime Records Division) in 1935, and it handled public affairs for the Bureau throughout Hoover’s tenure.\textsuperscript{47} By doing so, however, Hoover opened himself up to further criticism from a key member of Congress: Tennessee senator Kenneth McKellar, who chaired the appropriations subcommittee responsible for the Department of Justice’s budget. When Hoover appeared before McKellar’s subcommittee in 1936 to request that his agency’s budget be doubled to $5 million in the next fiscal year, McKellar pounced. (Hoover had also offended the senator by refusing to hire as special agents any of the men McKellar had recommended.) Senator McKellar criticized the Bureau’s public relations ef-
forts, noting that in the previous year, more than fifty feature articles on the 
FBI had appeared in magazines:

Senator McKellar: Was anything appropriated to pay these writers?  
Hoover: No, sir; not a cent.  
Senator McKellar: Have you any writers in your Department or do you 
employ any writers?  
Hoover: Not in the Bureau of Investigation.  
Senator McKellar: No writers are employed?  
Hoover: Not in the Bureau of Investigation.48

This was not entirely true. The Crime Records Division employed a corre-
respondence team and two or three key officials who shepherded journalists 
through the process of reporting on the FBI. They provided information, re-
plied to queries, and even edited copy before publication. Crime Records 
officials also authored “Interesting Case” memoranda—dramatic retellings 
of Bureau exploits provided to the press. Hoover was splitting hairs. Was 
writing letters, including letters with a public relations intent, considered 
writing? Were those “Interesting Case” memoranda simply part of the nor-
mal record keeping of any government bureaucracy? Was editing and rewrit-
ing copy considered writing? Clearly, these activities fit the definition 
McKellar had in mind. But as Hoover and his aides frequently did in testi-
mony to congressional committees—for example, answering “no” when 
asked if there were “secret files,” because that was not the FBI’s term for 
them—he prevaricated, defining writing and public relations narrowly.

As his chief “writer” in the Crime Records Section, Hoover had hired 
Louis B. Nichols, considered by some to be the second most influential per-
son in the history of the FBI.49 For more than twenty years, Nichols acted as 
the editor and protector of the FBI’s public image. A Decatur, Illinois, native, 
Nichols earned his law degree from Hoover’s alma mater, the George Wash-
ington University School of Law, in 1934. He entered the FBI shortly after 
graduation, bringing with him experience as a public relations officer for the 
Young Men’s Christian Association, a job he had held during law school. 
Nichols’s stunning rise coincided with Hoover’s need for public relations ad-
vice. According to historian Athan Theoharis, Nichols “personally was re-
ponsible for developing the Bureau’s policies regarding the press, radio, 
films, and eventually, television.”50 Nichols held other titles during his 
twenty-three years in the FBI, including assistant to the director, but he re-
mained the most important public relations adviser in the Bureau’s executive leadership.

Review any FBI file produced during Nichols’s tenure, and you will find that his comments and suggestions with regard to public relations carried tremendous weight with Hoover and with associate director Clyde Tolson. Nichols organized the Crime Records Section as a clearinghouse for all media information coming into the Bureau. News clippings were reviewed, and any items of interest to the FBI were summarized. A correspondence team authored tens of thousands of letters that were sent out over Hoover’s signature over the decades. High-level administrators in Crime Records edited and rewrote news, feature, and magazine stories produced by cooperative reporters. Crime Records staff rewrote scripts for radio, television, and film. In short, Crime Records was responsible for authoring and enforcing the FBI’s preferred image of itself. Any reports in the news or entertainment media that were off message might create public concern over the Bureau’s power or jurisdiction. Thus, it was up to Crime Records, and often to Nichols him-
self, to deal with off-message reporters and to stroke and flatter the Bureau’s news-gathering friends.

Under Nichols, FBI public relations was a hugely successful combination of salient stories and rigid messaging discipline. The Bureau’s growth in public relations acumen mirrored (and helped drive) the overall growth of the Bureau. By 1936, the FBI had grown from fewer than 100 agents in 1930 to nearly 900 agents stationed in the “Seat of Government,” as FBI headquarters in Washington was called, and in fifty-two field offices nationwide.51 Despite the ongoing crisis of legitimacy fanned by critics on the Left, the once unknown Hoover and his FBI had become “reassuring symbol[s] of security and stability for most Americans.”52 That same year, Secretary of State Cordell Hull gave the FBI oral authorization to investigate alleged subversion; this was strengthened by a presidential directive in 1939. With the 1940 passage of the Smith Act, outlawing advocacy of the violent overthrow of the government, and the Hatch Act, outlawing federal employment for any member of an allegedly subversive organization, Hoover had all the authorization he needed to become the American secret police that critics feared.

Even as he ramped up the investigation of subversives (very broadly defined in Hoover’s narrow worldview), the director succeeded in addressing the Bureau’s ongoing crisis of legitimacy by proffering his FBI as an all-American scientific agency fighting evil wherever it appeared and weaving together the patchwork of local law enforcement. Nichols and the Crime Records Section worked with reporters to amplify that message and drown out critics. The restrained but efficient FBI and the dogged and careful Hoover were images that Americans were, by and large, happy to accept. But there remained significant opposition to the idea of federal law enforcement in general and the Bureau of Investigation in particular. According to historian Powers, “After the Palmer Raids and the FBI’s antiunion campaigns of the early twenties, the left’s hatred of the Bureau had hardened into a basic fact of American political life.”53

One place where Hoover monitored the potential for the Left to raise uncomfortable questions about the FBI was America’s newsrooms. In the introduction to his “Molders of Public Opinion” report, Sullivan captured Hoover’s belief that so-called subversive journalists were not simply dissenters but were active and conspiratorial agents of evil:

The ability of the press or other media of public information to work for good or evil is dependent upon those who comprise its ranks. The views
of those within its ranks will inevitably be a reflection of some of their
desires and personal beliefs. . . . Looking at the following representative
segment of those molding public opinion today, we can raise the
question as to whether or not many have made themselves worthy of
American ideals so that they may be entrusted with carrying forward
human progress and dignity.54

Sullivan’s 1959 case study demonstrated the single-minded nature of the FBI
that Hoover had built. It was a narrow and conspiratorial worldview that
Sullivan completely internalized.

A Boston native, Sullivan joined the FBI in 1941 at an annual salary of
$3,800. He was quickly promoted because of what a supervisor called a “par-
ticularly deep and thoughtful approach to his work.”55 He was also described
as being “somewhat small,” but with a “mature outlook.”56 (Nearly every per-
formance review in Sullivan’s more than 1,000-page personnel file men-
tioned his diminutive stature.) During the 1940s, Sullivan moved from the
San Antonio office to the so-called Seat of Government in Washington,
where he worked as a supervisor in the Strategic Intelligence Service (SIS),
the Bureau’s overseas spying operation. Sullivan was responsible for super-
vising SIS operations in Venezuela, British Guiana, Suriname, French
Guiana, Aruba, Curaçao, and the Caribbean, with the exception of Cuba.57
During this time, Sullivan began communicating directly with Hoover, for
example, suggesting a special contact the Bureau could use to try to convince
FDR to put the FBI in charge of overseas spying after World War II.58

Throughout the 1940s, Sullivan’s ambition was on display. He was praised
for volunteering for Christmas duty, pitching in on special assignments
without being asked, and deferring his vacation to cover for colleagues. Su-
pervisors described him as “unusually conscientious and hard-working,”
with “an unusual aptitude for research and writing.”59 Marksmanship was
the only recurring negative on his annual reviews. In 1946, Sullivan moved
from SIS and became a supervisor in the FBI’s Atomic Energy Section; then,
in 1947, he moved from the periphery to the center of Hoover’s interest, su-
pervising the Communist Research Desk of the Internal Security Section,
where he created an index of alleged communist front organizations for the
attorney general. About the same time, Sullivan earned his master’s degree in
education from George Washington University.

In 1948, Sullivan continued his campaign to catch Hoover’s attention,
thanking the director for a promotion and pledging his loyalty in a personal
letter. He vowed to demonstrate that Hoover’s confidence in him was justified and wrote, “in this time of crisis and of rapidly mounting threats to our country, our ideals, and our faith, I want you to know that I am immediately ready and most willing to serve the Bureau either inside or outside of this country in any capacity at all, irrespective of the rigors, privations, and dangers of the assignment.”

Hoover wrote back that he appreciated the expression of loyalty. Hoover next made note of Sullivan in a handwritten comment on a memorandum informing the director that Sullivan’s premature son had died. “Keep [Sullivan] in mind,” Hoover wrote. “He looks as if he has possibilities.”

Sullivan continued his rise within the Bureau, taking the initiative to
write a number of summaries, including “Glossary of Marxist Terms,” “Definitions of Socialism,” “The Communist Party’s Position on Fascism,” and “Eight Points of Communist Philosophy.” Sullivan began lecturing on the communist threat at FBI in-service training sessions. He was angling to become the Bureau’s point man on communism and was getting noticed.63 Upon his next promotion, he wrote another fawning letter to Hoover, exclaiming that “work done for the Bureau is not work at all. On the contrary it is a privilege freely given to a free person to use freely whatever talents he may have in the behalf of his deepest convictions—convictions which give meaning and purpose to life.”64 After another pay raise prompted by an eighty-three-day marathon during which Sullivan worked an average of three hours a day of “voluntary overtime,” he was again promoted.65

In 1950, Sullivan was offered, and turned down, an executive position outside the FBI. An avid self-promoter, he provided Hoover with a copy of the letter he sent to railroad owner Frederick C. Dumaine Jr., rejecting the job offer. Clearly aiming to demonstrate his loyalty to Hoover, Sullivan told Dumaine that he could not take the position because he was completely satisfied at the FBI and cited four reasons, including Hoover’s leadership. “While it is true I may be able to earn a larger salary outside of the government service,” Sullivan wrote, “I do believe the four reasons given above adequately compensate for a larger salary.”66

Upon his tenth anniversary at the FBI, Sullivan wrote to Hoover again, this time a florid, three-page tome expressing his feelings about the Bureau. “A man grows slowly into the FBI, absorbs its spirit and becomes a part of it as he becomes a part of his own family,” Sullivan wrote. “It is both a pleasant and a painful process. The FBI, like one’s family, has its ups and downs, its good days and bad days.” Sullivan could not have chosen a more appealing theme. After all, Hoover had no family except for the FBI.67 Hoover had the letter reprinted in The Investigator, the FBI’s internal newsletter.68 By 1953, Sullivan’s pay had increased to more than $11,000 and he had been placed in charge of the Central Research Desk in the renamed Domestic Intelligence Division. He was the Bureau’s top expert on communism and was responsible for giving lectures to other agents and to outside organizations.

Hoover’s interest began to take on a paternal cast that same year when a serious viral infection put Sullivan in the hospital for several weeks and kept him away from his Washington office off and on for more than eighteen months. Hoover wrote a note on a memorandum updating him on Sullivan’s condition: “Find out from Dr. Miller when he thinks Sullivan could...
safely return, add one week to it & I will order Sullivan not to return until
then. He is one of our most conscientious & valuable men.”69 Upon Sulli-
vann’s return to work in late March 1953, Hoover noted: “He should take it
easy.”70 Hoover sent Sullivan to the FBI office in Tucson, Arizona, on “special
assignment” for several months, where he could recuperate in the dry condi-
tions there.71 During his time in Tucson, Sullivan continued his prolific writ-
ing, producing eleven new research studies on communism. The SAC in
Tucson took advantage of Sullivan’s presence by booking him to speak to lo-
cal civic groups.

Thus Sullivan’s focus on becoming the in-house expert on communism,
along with his ability to coherently express the Bureau’s (Hoover’s) position
in writing, had placed him on the director’s radar as a rising star on the
management team. In the ensuing years, Sullivan continued to show an un-
canny ability to express positions that captured Hoover’s imagination. He
had become the golden boy among Hoover’s cadre of anticommunist hawks
and was positioned to continue his quick rise to the top in the Seat of Gov-
ernment. By 1954, Hoover was addressing Sullivan as “Bill” in correspon-
dence and had promoted him to the rank of inspector.72

Between 1954 and 1963, Sullivan was the Bureau’s go-to speaker on com-
munism, addressing more than 200 government, military, and law enforce-
ment groups. Sullivan’s personnel file contains several hundred letters from
those who sponsored or attended those talks, praising Hoover for sending
such an expert and dynamic speaker. During that interval, Sullivan’s health
improved significantly, and he racked up an average of three hours of over-
time per day. On October 25, 1957, Sullivan wrote another letter to Hoover
in which he discussed “disturbing” events, including the launch of Sputnik
by the Soviet Union, and praised the director for maintaining his focus on
internal security. “In the light of these recent events, will these powerful op-
ponents of internal security remove their ostrich-like heads from the sand to
recognize the reality of the situation which you have been forcefully and
clearly describing?” Sullivan wrote. “We must wait and observe, knowing
only too well that ‘there are none so blind as those who will not see.’”73 Dur-
ing that same period, Sullivan began the odd practice of referring to himself
in the third person in his memoranda: “Sullivan is of the opinion that next
fall his lectures should be highly selective,” Sullivan wrote.74

In 1957 and 1958, Sullivan, along with sixteen other FBI personnel, con-
tributed to the production of a book, Masters of Deceit: The Story of Commu-
nism and How to Fight It, which was published by Henry Holt and listed
Hoover as the author. Crime Records chief Nichols cited Sullivan as the second most important contributor to the project, which was based largely on the studies Sullivan had produced in the General Research Section.75

On June 2, 1961, Sullivan's efforts were rewarded when he became assistant director in charge of the Domestic Intelligence Division. In 1963, his leadership of Domestic Intelligence was questioned in the wake of the assassination of President Kennedy. Lee Harvey Oswald was not included in the Bureau's extensive security index, and Sullivan was officially censured. Only a few months later, though, Sullivan earned an outstanding performance rating for his work in 1963 and 1964.76 Clearly, he remained a Hoover favorite.

As assistant director in the Domestic Intelligence Division, Sullivan supervised the FBI's counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO, which was charged with disrupting and undermining, through various and often questionable means, groups considered to be threats to national security. Based on Sullivan's suggestion, the investigation of “racial matters,” including coverage of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and civil rights groups as well, was transferred to the Domestic Intelligence Division in August 1964.77 Under that mandate, Sullivan approved (and may have authored) an anonymous letter to Dr. Martin Luther King that threatened to expose King's alleged extramarital affairs. This letter, according to historian Athan Theoharis, is “often interpreted as an effort to induce the civil rights activist to commit suicide.”78 In 1970, Sullivan was elevated to the number-three position in the Bureau, assistant to the director, behind Hoover and Tolson. Sullivan was the ideal FBI official, having adopted a perfect facsimile of Hoover’s xenophobic and conspiratorial worldview. He was also a perfect example of how quickly Hoover could sour on an agent who had ideas of his own.

In 1971, the former golden child publicly criticized Hoover, who had refused to accept proposals by the Nixon administration that would have expanded the Bureau's powers. Fearing that Hoover would use the existence of White House–ordered wiretaps of members of the news media against the Nixon administration, Sullivan turned the material over to White House officials without informing the Bureau. Sullivan hoped Nixon would protect him and might even force Hoover out and elevate him to the director's office. Instead, Hoover forced Sullivan to retire because of what the director called his “insolence and insubordination.”79 Sullivan's final FBI performance rating from early 1971 was “outstanding.”
When members of the media contacted the FBI and asked for a recent photo of Sullivan, their requests were denied.\textsuperscript{80} When Sullivan, who had served in the FBI for more than thirty years, asked to retain his badge for sentimental reasons, Hoover denied the request.\textsuperscript{81} Former \textit{New York Post} editor and longtime Hoover critic James A. Wechsler observed that Sullivan “had been declared a non-person.”\textsuperscript{82} Others compared Sullivan’s erasure from the Bureau to Hoover’s rewriting of FBI history to remove Chicago SAC Melvin Purvis from the Dillinger case nearly four decades earlier. Washington columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak captured the lesson of Sullivan’s firing in two sentences: “In frustration, some of the FBI’s top officials began dealing, behind Hoover’s back, directly with the highly conservative chiefs of the Nixon Justice Department. Furious, Hoover struck back with his reign of terror.”\textsuperscript{83}

Perhaps Hoover saw elements of himself in Sullivan. After all, Hoover had been Palmer’s ambitious young aide and had made himself indispensable by becoming the Justice Department’s top authority on radical anarchists and communists in 1919 and 1920. The lesson in Sullivan’s steady rise and precipitous fall was this: the way to get to the top of the FBI (and stay there) was to adopt Hoover’s narrow worldview and his simple, black-and-white ethical system while simultaneously flattering the director, who would designate as his golden children those who stood above criticism within the bureaucracy. Hoover was the Sun King of the FBI and expected all his employees to adopt his worldview, maintain it over time, and provide an endless stream of praise.

Sullivan’s 1959 memorandum summarizing more than 4,000 cross-references in the files the FBI had compiled on journalists was based on reports authored over time by single-minded FBI agents who shared the director’s distrust of the press; thus, it may be seen as reflective of Hoover’s own views on the media and the political Left, which remained very consistent over time. Sullivan’s 1959 review was based, in part, on a memorandum produced more than twenty years prior, in 1938, at the request of \textit{Reader’s Digest} editor Fulton Oursler. Oursler was a pen pal of Hoover’s and an avowed friend of the Bureau, and he asked the director to provide material for a story about how “newspapers have interfered with crime.”\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Reader’s Digest} was, at the time, the most widely read periodical in the United States. Within a week, Hoover’s public relations staff responded to Oursler with two lengthy memoranda. “Of course the material I am sending you will be more than you will want to use, but I wanted you to have a rather complete
picture of some of the things with which we have been confronted during the past few years,” Hoover’s ghostwriter informed Oursler.85 The letter writer even offered to check Oursler’s article when it was done, “in order that there will absolutely be no comeback whatsoever from any representative of the press who might be involved in the instances mentioned.”86

One of the attachments was a twelve-page review of situations in which the press had aided the FBI in its law enforcement duties. In a breathless, oddly punctuated, run-on, stream-of-consciousness sentence, the FBI of 1938 offered its view of the role of the press:

Successful law enforcement is dependent upon a close friendly relationship with the press and other great molders of public opinion for these mediums have a public duty and a public obligation similar to that of the Federal Bureau of Investigation or any other law enforcement agency, and its ideals should never be prostituted for the sole purpose of building circulation through sensational articles which fail to treat crime subjects in the proper manner or through an unholy alliance with crime.87

In a nod to the fear-mongering notion that a massive criminal population was hidden in our midst—as asserted by Courtney Ryley Cooper’s Bureau-authorized 1935 book Ten Thousand Public Enemies—the memorandum suggested that an apathetic citizenry allowed hordes of criminals to thrive in secrecy. The role of the press, the memorandum suggested, was to publicize crime only by reprinting law enforcement notices and photographs when asked to do so. Premature reporting on crime tipped off criminals “before the investigating officials have had ample time to complete their inquiries” and drove those 10,000 public enemies into hiding.88 That sort of premature publicity emanated, according to the memo, from “the small percentage of the press totally devoid of ethics and civic responsibility.”89 The memorandum cited the Lindbergh kidnapping case and the shooting of John Dillinger as instances in which the press had aided the FBI’s work by withholding information from the public and later printing the Bureau’s accounting of events without question.

The second memorandum, titled “Press Interference and Successful Law Enforcement,” ran fifty-four pages. In the introduction, the author asserted that, more often than not, “the press has fallen far short of discharging its public duty when it fails to serve as the active ally of law enforcement agen-
cies and officers seeking to further law and order.” The remainder of the memorandum cited examples of the press hampering the FBI’s work through premature publicity, unethical tactics, the “physical hindering of investigative activities and unwarranted attacks,” distortion of facts, press alliances with the underworld, and glorification of the criminal.90

Considering Hoover’s own attitude toward the press, the vituperative tone of these two memoranda is not surprising. The FBI was a patrimonial organization. Sitting at his desk in the Justice Department building, Hoover rarely spoke to his underlings; instead, he wielded his blue pen on memoranda to set the tone and shape the policies of his Bureau. His contempt for many members of the press was no secret either inside or outside the FBI. In 1936, for example, Hoover addressed the American Society of Newspaper
Editors (ASNE) in Washington, D.C. In an off-the-record speech, Hoover lauded columnist Walter Winchell for agreeing to withhold information about the Lindbergh kidnapping case. He told Winchell in a letter, “I thought the editors should know that there was at least one columnist who put patriotism and the safety of society above any mercenary attitude in his profession.”91 As a result of Hoover’s ASNE presentation, the gathered editors pledged “to cooperate with all law enforcement agencies in guarding against the premature publication of information harmful to the successful completion of criminal investigations.”92

Hoover’s narrow, instrumental conceptualization of the Fourth Estate as a convenient megaphone for law enforcement was evident time and again throughout his tenure as director. In 1936, for example, Hoover claimed the Charles Weyerhauser kidnapping would be the nation’s last such case. One month later, ten-year-old Charles Mattson, son of a prominent surgeon, was kidnapped from the same neighborhood as Weyerhauser. Mattson’s lifeless body was later found, but the crime was never solved.93 Defended by Winchell, Hoover declared that press criticism had undermined the FBI and thus caused the Mattson kidnapping:

This crime can be traced directly to certain activities and forces which have been at work for some time in trying to belittle, ridicule and sneer at the “G-Men.” There are certain writers of slime columns suffering from mental halitosis and certain editorial writers who have an aggravated case of mental diarrhea that regurgitate their own filth and must tear down something which was gradually growing to be a restraining influence on the criminal of the underworld.94

When challenged by critics, Hoover attacked, usually labeling those critics un-American and, at several key moments, declaring that a coordinated “smear campaign” was under way with the goal of overthrowing the government, starting with the FBI.

In requesting a review of journalists’ files in 1959, Hoover was gathering intelligence in preparation to launch an attack on his critics. Less than two weeks after Hoover’s request, assistant director William C. Sullivan forwarded his memorandum to the director. Sullivan and his staff had painstakingly combed through the FBI files of 100 reporters, editors, and publishers (Cook, a writer for The Nation, did not represent the mainstream media and was not included). In his memorandum—which was given the
file index of 100, signifying a domestic intelligence investigation—Sullivan reported that twelve of the journalists had no subversive connections, many had subversive connections but had not acted on them in their publications, and forty had “pertinent factors in their backgrounds” that led them to produce stories that, in Sullivan’s opinion, discredited the American way of life.95

Written in the style of an academic paper, Sullivan’s introduction portrayed the press as a key battleground for the “minds and souls of men.” He wrote, “There is growing concern among many in the United States today that some elements of our media of communication are either wittingly or unwittingly using their power to support the communist struggle for men’s minds.”96

In his eighty-page report, which moved through the executive team to Hoover, Sullivan boiled down tens of thousands of pages of FBI files into a series of so-called blind memoranda to “conceal the Bureau as the source,” Sullivan wrote. “This was done in the event the Director should desire to make available to appropriate persons some of the information on an informal and confidential basis.”97 Blind memoranda were commonly used by the FBI and were, essentially, anonymous news releases shared with accommodating reporters, editors, broadcasters, publishers, and other opinion shapers. The documents were typically summaries of investigative material and analysis, some of it confirmed and some not. Blind memoranda ensured plausible deniability, in that there was no indication that the FBI was the source of the material. Of course, recipients who were friends of the Bureau knew the source, but they could be counted on not to cite the FBI in their reports or in their whispers to other influential stakeholders. The FBI hoped that by providing reporters with this first- or secondhand information, those who were loyal to Hoover would produce news stories and columns that undermined the director’s critics.

In his preamble to the “Molders” memorandum, Sullivan quoted author and moralist J. G. Holland: “The mind grows by what it feeds on.” And he noted that journalism “exerts a tremendous power upon the minds of men.” Sullivan continued: “A vast segment of the representatives of the varied media of communication in this country advocate a deviation from strict adherence to right principles. Whether their efforts stem from naivete, poor judgment, misunderstanding, ignorance, or from calculated efforts to support communist objectives, the cumulative effect constitutes what amounts to psychological pressure on the American people.”98
In its details, Sullivan’s memorandum read like a modern supermarket tabloid. New York Herald-Tribune columnist Joseph Alsop Jr. was outed as a homosexual.99 It revealed that Pittsburgh Courier reporter Horace Roscoe Cayton had told a church group in 1946 that communism offered a possible solution to racism.100 

New York Post columnist Murray Kempton and editor James A. Wechsler were identified as members of the Young Communist League in their college days during the 1930s—affiliations they had both publicly admitted and renounced.101 The fact that Wechsler was, by 1958, an ardent anticomunist did not eliminate him from suspicion.102 Everything from a fleeting association with an organization labeled “subversive” by the House Un-American Activities Committee to the publication of stories critical of the FBI was cited to suggest that the forty reporters, broadcasters, and editors were anti-American.

“In no other realm is the power of the press as important today as in the struggle between the Free World and the onrushing forces of world communism,” Sullivan wrote. “This is particularly true in the sense that the primary purpose of journalism is communication of thought, while a basic tactic of communism is to utilize every media of communication to advance communist objectives.”103

The “Molders of Public Opinion” memorandum is an interesting example of the FBI’s extensive domestic intelligence operations. It demonstrates the voluminous details gathered over several decades through both passive monitoring and active investigation and stored in the FBI files of hundreds of American journalists.104 By the late 1950s, the Bureau had systematically monitored influential journalists for nearly thirty years, categorizing them as friend or foe based on the information in their files.105

It also demonstrates the importance the FBI placed on its own public relations practices. Faced with an ongoing crisis of legitimacy, Hoover created a counternarrative in which his agency touted its undeniable utility, claimed restraint in its law enforcement efforts, and suggested that dispassionate science, not human foibles, set its investigative agenda. Most important, though, Hoover’s story of the FBI cast himself as its careful, reluctant, but decisive leader. Americans could trust the scientific, responsible FBI because it was led by the ultimate American patriot, J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover spent thirty of his forty-eight years as director trying to “utilize every media of communication” to advance his own FBI narrative through public relations. News stories, magazine articles, radio broadcasts, motion pictures, and, ultimately, television carried that narrative. Just in case anyone stepped out of
line or went off message, Hoover had his blind memoranda, which he shared with friendly journalists who used it to marginalize critics, trumpet the Bureau’s successes, or simply retell the FBI narrative.

Hoover’s files provide insight into newsrooms and show that for many reporters and editors, including several Pulitzer Prize winners, a desire to gain Hoover’s favor won out over truth, democracy, objectivity, and other vaunted elements of journalistic canon. Reporters and editors were all too willing to sell out their watchdog status for bylines, headlines, and personal acclaim. They watched as the Bureau marginalized its critics and realized that their access to dramatic and salient FBI stories, and to Hoover himself, required them to check any critical impulses at the door. The FBI allowed almost any reporter one opportunity to access Bureau information. But continued access depended on a willingness to at least give the FBI the benefit of the doubt, and it might require that they become active, “objective” public defenders of the Bureau.

The story of Hoover’s public relations, then, is a story of a government law enforcement agency that used its special powers to adjust reality and, as a result, placed journalists on one side or the other of a bright line that separated FBI friends and FBI enemies. It is also the story of the alleged watchdogs of the Fourth Estate—molders of public opinion—who, because of some combination of personal politics and ambition, chose to close their eyes to the Bureau’s excesses, toe the FBI public relations line, and uncritically amplify Hoover’s FBI myth, thus enabling the Bureau’s transgressions of civil liberties. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the director began constructing the public relations machinery that allowed the FBI to exert power over its friends in the press, who in turn helped create and maintain the Bureau’s cloak of legitimacy—a facade that hid the extent of Hoover’s illegal political surveillance for nearly four decades.