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Introduction:
Defining a “Hoover Era”

Historians and politicians like to brand time periods with evocative labels. Eras are declared. Historical epochs are christened. Sometimes, the principal characters of an age attempt to declare an era themselves, with varying levels of success. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) offered a New Deal, and it stuck. President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) argued for a Great Society. President Harry S. Truman did not have quite the same success declaring the era of a Square Deal, and few remember the Gerald Ford administration as the WIN years (Whip Inflation Now). At times, eras are named by historians. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s four-year tirade of alcohol-fueled fearmongering and self-promotion turned his name into a pejorative, McCarthyism. Events themselves may define an era. The first world war, the Great War in its time, became World War I after a second global conflict arose and was slotted in as World War II. Sometimes, the media name an era, and the name sticks. President Ronald Reagan’s eight years of trickle-down policies—Reaganomics or “voodoo” economics, depending on your politics—have become accepted as defining a Reagan era. President Bill Clinton’s tenure in the Oval Office gave us what is becoming known as the Clinton years. It seems possible that the Obama era will be defined in the future by his signature legislative accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act, but under a title conferred derisively by some but adopted by Barack Obama himself—Obamacare.

One might imagine, then, that a towering figure like FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, a man who loomed over American society as a singular individual of power and authority for decades, might warrant an era of his own. No influential figure in American history held power longer than the FBI director who served for nearly fifty years, from his late twenties into his late seventies. When Hoover became director, many Americans had yet to have their homes connected to an electrical grid. By the time he died, Americans had
tired of routine voyages to the moon. Hoover’s reign overlays most of the
named eras of the so-called American century, from the Roaring Twenties to
the Great Depression, World War II, and McCarthyism and into the Cold
War. Eight presidents, from Calvin Coolidge to Richard Nixon, oversaw
Hoover’s work, at least in theory. Seventeen attorneys general served as his
immediate supervisor, at least nominally. None of those attorneys general,
save perhaps Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), remotely approached the FBI direc-
tor’s notoriety, and none achieved anywhere near the kind of power he ac-
crued and wielded. Hoover led a seemingly omnipotent agency, capable of
tracking outlaws, unmasking spies and communists, and performing mira-
cles of science in its laboratory. Historians generally agree that Hoover’s
specter loomed over elected and appointed politicians throughout nearly all
of his forty-eight years in office as one of the most powerful figures in Amer-
ican society. For decades, the bulldog visage of the FBI director instilled fear
in the hearts of criminals, dissidents, and public officials alike. Historians
have not generally acknowledged the middle fifty years of the twentieth cen-
tury as a “J. Edgar Hoover era,” yet Hoover’s astonishing power and influence
over events is frequently acknowledged in studies of other prominent Amer-
ican characters and eras. Though Hoover was viewed by a majority of Amer-
icans as a strong and generally effective figure during his lifetime,
understandings of the actual extent of his authority over his nominal superi-
ors and of his narrow-minded character have only grown in the decades
since he died.

In 1974, two years after the director’s death and following intensive inves-
tigations of the nation’s intelligence agencies, Congress overrode President
Gerald Ford’s veto of changes to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)
and thereby helped open Hoover’s detailed files to historians. The books
and articles that followed in the ensuing decades have laid out the frame-
work of Hoover’s secretive agency for the first time. Slowly but surely, the
FBI’s role in events of those decades, including often excessive and some-
times illegal investigations, has become known.

Americans have learned that the circumstances under which public ene-
emies were shot by Bureau agents in the 1930s were not always as they were
portrayed by the FBI and the news media at the time. Americans have dis-
covered that what contemporary critics in the 1940s and 1950s claimed—
that the FBI deployed thousands of wiretaps even after they were declared
illegal by the Supreme Court in the mid-1930s—was true. In fact, FBI files
confirmed that, for decades, the Bureau used so-called black bag jobs (illegal
break-ins) to plant bugs and rifle through files in clear violation of the law, acting under an expansive interpretation of an FDR era executive order as authorization.\(^4\) The files show that FBI agents infiltrated and undermined social movements that were advocating for change in the 1960s. The Bureau’s intrusive and disruptive Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) frequently skirted the law, and its existence stood in conflict with multiple First Amendment rights. Hoover’s COINTELPRO files confirmed what social reform groups at the time had claimed—that the federal government was the enemy of social change, monitoring and undermining their legal dissent despite clear-cut constitutional protections.\(^5\) Although it is important to acknowledge the FBI’s often innovative traditional law enforcement work, the specter of its domestic, political intelligence efforts, mostly hidden throughout the Hoover years, throws a dark shadow on the Bureau’s record, as acknowledged, to some extent at least, by several post-Hoover directors. (In the mid-1970s, for example, FBI director Clarence Kelley referred to the excesses of the Hoover era as “foibles and idiosyncrasies.”)\(^6\) The reality of the Hoover years was a Bureau that loomed over US society, cheering mainstream Americans with its triumphs and chilling dissenters through its intrusive domestic surveillance and oppressive counterintelligence programs.

As depicted in historical studies, Hoover remains an enigma, a divisive figure who has been reduced in stature even as revelations of his power continue to emerge. Jokes about his sexuality, based on apocryphal tales rather than factual observations, have turned him into a cartoon character, in some ways blunting the harsh reality of his Bureau’s actions. Can the mainstream public take seriously concerns about excesses of the J. Edgar Hoover era when the most often encountered traces of him are “Hoover in drag” jokes from late-night talk show hosts?\(^7\) How can we take seriously any claim that Hoover, so often presented as a one-dimensional object of ridicule, was actually a mastermind of secrecy and power who stoked fear to affect the course of events during his tenure? After all, it is difficult to document, quantify, or clearly express the influence that fear of his control of information generated, from the halls of Congress to the hearts of activists. Thus, Hoover has become a historical figure defined by certain moments when his influence became evident or his ability to affect events was acknowledged publicly by others, rather than the overseer of his own, named era. The moments when he stepped into public view include the Bureau’s triumphant shootings and captures of public enemies in the 1930s, its World War II-era
pursuit of spies and saboteurs on the home front, and the director’s seemingly endless crusade against communism during the Cold War. Every few years between 1940 and 1972, off-message portrayals of the Bureau as an American “gestapo” or Soviet-style secret police trickled out. But they were quickly swept away in a deluge of heroic portrayals in the news and entertainment media, never gaining traction among a mainstream audience that wanted to believe the construction of Hoover as a uniquely effective and consistent American hero.8

This book suggests a different set of historical moments from the Hoover era to consider, moments that did not necessarily involve any shots fired, spies captured, or communist cells unmasked. Instead, this study focuses on a series of moments that define an essential element of Hoover’s long-term success, an underlying source of his power that has scarcely been explored—public relations (PR). As defined by the founders of the practice in the 1920s, public relations involved the crafting of persuasive messages based on an understanding of the audiences for those messages. It was defined by Edward Bernays and his wife, Doris Fleischman, as more than simply P. T. Barnum-esque caterwauling aimed at gaining media attention, positive or negative. Public relations, they said, required the gathering of information about an audience and the production of strategically crafted messages that would engage those readers or listeners in a sort of relationship with an organization. Successful PR, as the definition of success came to be understood in the first half of the twentieth century, would result in an audience of people who essentially chose to incorporate the organization’s preferred understandings of itself as an element of their own identities.9 An attack on Hoover’s FBI, then, would be an attack on the mainstream Americans who supported him and who, presumably, would at least ignore those messages and might even speak out and counter them.

In the context of the understandings of early public relations, the FBI’s shooting of famed outlaw John Dillinger in 1934 becomes important not because it introduced the Bureau to many Americans as a heroic defender of order but because of the public relations messaging failure that ensued whereby FBI agent Melvin Purvis—and not Hoover—was briefly viewed as the nation’s top cop.10 One apparent result of that failure, the 1935 creation of the Bureau’s public relations office, the Crime Records Section, represents a little-known but enormously significant moment in the FBI’s ascension to iconic status in American society. Prior to the establishment of the Crime Records Section, Hoover and his chief assistants managed the Bureau’s pub-
lic image through happenstance, responding to events of the day rather than shaping any systematic and coherent message about the agency. The establishment of Crime Records led to more than thirty years of highly disciplined control over the Bureau’s preferred public image and the development of a reliable cadre of defenders in the news and entertainment media, in Congress, in statehouses and city halls, and in living rooms across the country.

Bureaucratic personnel changes rarely emerge as epic historical moments of note. Hoover’s ascension to the directorship of the Bureau is the exception that proves the rule. Historians have indeed noted the importance of that moment in 1924 when an attorney general who was critical of the Bureau’s role in the repressive Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920 oddly chose to name the coordinator of those raids, Hoover, to somehow “clean up” the Bureau. Another pivotal moment, though, the 1935 hiring of a man who might be viewed as the second or third most important person in FBI history, Louis B. Nichols, has at least been noted by historians. An experienced public relations practitioner and natural networker, Nichols oversaw the Crime Records operation for more than twenty years. During that time, the Bureau’s enduring public image, centered on scientific law enforcement and a thoughtful reluctance to wield its power with the director as its trustworthy overseer, was created, cemented, and zealously protected. This book explores Nichols’s tenure through his management of several public relations crises in those two decades. A consummate networker, Nichols skillfully worked with the opinion shapers of the news media and in Congress to identify and counter challenges to the FBI’s preferred public image.

A frequently cited but lesser-known FBI official, Crime Records chief Milton A. Jones, the Bureau’s editor-in-chief, served from the early 1940s until he retired after Hoover’s death. A quiet Kentuckian and Harvard graduate, Jones was frequently censured by Hoover and Associate Director Clyde Tolson, typically for minor errors in one or two of the thousands of pieces of correspondence and news media material that emerged from his office every week. Yet he was trusted by Nichols as the FBI’s top analyst of critical publications, digesting them and formulating counternarratives for the Bureau. Jones and his staff translated the Hoover message and personality into print, and the results speak for themselves. Jones’s memoranda and reports are among the most frequently cited by FBI historians. For that reason alone, his tenure marks a moment worthy of consideration.

Other headquarters agents were also responsible for outsized contribu-
Defining a “Hoover Era”

Jones’s close friend, Crime Records agent Fern Stukenbroeker, became a reliable surrogate speaker for Hoover. Stukenbroeker, a professorial figure who held a PhD in history, was a talented and engaging public speaker, ghostwriter for the director’s many law journal articles, and one of the contributors who created Hoover’s book *Masters of Deceit*. Stukenbroeker performed the remarkable trick of managing to stand out while somehow never eclipsing the director. Two other key advisers who would later become giants in shaping Bureau policies and messages, Cartha “Deke” DeLoach and William C. Sullivan, joined the FBI during the 1940s but would not emerge for their moments in the spotlight until the 1960s.

There were outsiders as well whose moments in Hoover’s favor allowed them significant influence on Bureau public relations. Press agent, journalist, and sometime literary figure Courtney Ryley Cooper helped Hoover and Nichols create an FBI public relations template emphasizing scientific law enforcement and establishing the Bureau’s legitimacy in the 1930s. That basic story structure, termed the “FBI myth” by historian Richard Gid Powers, was employed for decades, finishing its run in the public eye in 1974 when the Bureau’s prime-time television show, *The F.B.I.*, starring Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., was finally canceled. Cooper’s influence with Hoover waned after he became a source of embarrassment; he departed the scene via suicide in 1939, but his narrative structure lived on. More enduring and timely was the influence of Hoover’s liberal mole, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) counsel Morris Ernst. United by their ardent anticommunism, Ernst and Hoover (their relationship facilitated and managed primarily by Nichols) collaborated to develop messages that appealed to liberals concerned about the Bureau’s power and potential to undermine civil liberties. A reliable FBI confidential informant on ACLU policies and staff, Ernst also provided Hoover with cover on civil liberties issues through his frequent written and spoken defenses of the Bureau. Hoover, through Nichols, relied on Ernst as their embedded liberal to speak up on civil liberties, publicly and privately countering criticism from the political Left. Ernst’s most important contribution was an article developed with Nichols and another FBI friend, *Reader’s Digest* editor Fulton Oursler. Ernst’s “Why I No Longer Fear the F.B.I.” appeared in Oursler’s publication, the nation’s most widely read magazine, in 1950. A full-throated defense of Hoover and his agency, the article became an oft-cited prop in the Bureau’s PR campaign of the 1950s and 1960s, dusted off whenever a critical voice from the left popped up to attack the FBI. How could those critiques of Hoover be plausible when there was a
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liberal icon—an ACLU pioneer and counsel, no less—who had done his own investigation vouching for the Bureau as a protector of civil liberties? Ernst's moment of influence ended abruptly in the late 1950s when his public statements and actions became embarrassing to the FBI. His Reader's Digest article, however, lived on and is sometimes still cited by Hoover apologists and in the memoirs of former Bureau officials as proof that the judgments of historians are wrong and that the director was a great protector of civil liberties.15

With Nichols's departure in 1957, less talented public relations contact men, among them Gordon A. Nease, emerged for their moments but never achieved the kind of control over the Bureau's public image that their predecessor had established. Thanks in part to his inability to staunch the criticism of a 1958 “smear campaign,” Nease did not last long in that vital position, which attracted more than its share of attention from Hoover and Tolson. Nease's failure led the director to turn to the smooth, charming, but iron-willed DeLoach as his top public relations adviser. DeLoach's moment came in 1959 when he was appointed assistant director supervising a renamed and reorganized Crime Research Division, which included the former Crime Records Section responsible for FBI public relations. A sonorous, slow-talking Georgia native, the affable DeLoach had a remarkable talent for cultivating support for the Bureau in Congress; in other agencies; and, as Hoover's liaison to President Lyndon Johnson, in the White House. Whereas Nichols had been a relentless networker, building relationships with journalists by demonstrating that he was one of them, DeLoach fostered goodwill by managing upward, focusing most of his attention on his relationships with high-level opinion leaders in the federal government. He never pretended to understand or identify with the journalists he frequently worked with, as Nichols did, but instead created an aura of authority for himself, ingratiating himself with more powerful men while parroting Hoover's disdain for the news media.

Even as DeLoach worked his way up to become the third-highest official in the FBI, another assistant director, William Sullivan, emerged to challenge him as a key adviser to Hoover on communism, on civil rights, on the anti-war movement, and—because those issues were so dominant in the 1950s and 1960s—on public relations as well. The two rivals were frequently mentioned as potential replacements for Hoover, speculation that ultimately helped lead to Sullivan's firing one year after DeLoach departed in 1970. During his years of influence, though, Sullivan, as well as anyone else in FBI
history, channeled Hoover’s voice on communism and subversion, using an upward-management, ingratiating style within the Bureau similar to that employed by DeLoach. It was Sullivan who oversaw the Bureau’s COINTELPRO program, an effort to infiltrate and undermine left-wing activist groups that began in the 1960s. Sullivan’s monographs on communist issues became educational materials inside the Bureau and influenced PR messages on the outside. The persistent rumors of his aspirations to replace Hoover helped lead to his departure from the FBI in 1971. When Sullivan became too close to Richard Nixon’s White House and too critical of Hoover, he was shown the door.16

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked another notable moment for Hoover’s FBI—the decline of the director’s creaking empire, which, mirroring his physical decline, had fallen completely out of step with American society. DeLoach departed under uncertain circumstances in 1970, leaving the Bureau less able to exert influence among key constituencies in Congress and the White House. His replacement, Thomas E. Bishop, lacked the kinds of relationships with powerful people that his predecessor had developed and nurtured. It is doubtful, though, that even a powerful figure like DeLoach or Nichols could have slowed the accelerating decline of FBI prestige in the early 1970s. As Bishop struggled to enforce a message in that moment, Hoover’s failing health and the cultural shifts begun in the 1960s made the job more difficult and made the FBI seem increasingly like an anachronism. The Bureau’s public face—Hoover—had aged markedly, and his continued vituperative anticommunist statements and frequent references to the glory days of the Bureau in the 1930s and 1940s did not resonate with audiences during the Vietnam War and civil rights eras. By the time of the director’s death from a heart attack on May 2, 1972, the FBI was no longer immune from criticism. Its public relations message was maintained on television by The F.B.I. series until 1974, but the unraveling of Hoover’s secrets and the related decline of his prestige and the image of the agency itself had inexorably begun.

The one person who was a constant during most of the pivotal moments of Hoover’s tenure was his closest companion, Associate Director Clyde Tolson. Tolson was chair of the Bureau’s Executive Conference, a group of top executives in the FBI who made public relations and other policy recommendations to the director. Tolson essentially served as Hoover’s chief of staff, acting as a gatekeeper within the FBI, controlling access to Hoover, and recommending harsh punishment for Bureau agents who did not toe the
company PR line. For more than three decades, until a series of strokes and other health problems left him unable to work regularly, nearly every memorandum that reached the director passed first through Tolson’s hands. Many of the people who wished to meet with Hoover had to be recommended to him by Tolson.

In an agency where Hoover’s handwritten notes on memoranda defined policy, Tolson’s own handwritten recommendations often served as direct advice to the director or confirmed his orders. The two men rarely disagreed; when they did, it was generally Hoover who offered the more moderate solution to a problem. Tolson was an early public relations adviser to Hoover and continued to participate in decisions on PR matters throughout his tenure. Ultimately, though, he was the director’s resident protector and defender, serving in a quality control position, enforcing Hoover’s worldview, and protecting the FBI and the director against criticism or potential embarrassment. In an FBI that became, over the decades, a nearly mirror-perfect reflection of the personality and worldview of “the Boss,” Tolson provided a bulwark against potential dissonance, be it external or internal to the organization. No other adviser during Hoover’s tenure understood better than Tolson when to agree and when to disagree with the director. The two men were close confidants, spending an enormous amount of time together, eating lunch or dinner together almost every day, and even vacationing together. Their unusual closeness sparked speculation about the nature of their relationship, speculation that can never be answered definitely.17

What is important is that Hoover relied on Tolson as an enforcer, driving out any messages that failed to match the Bureau’s preferred internal and external public image and worldview. The hiring of Clyde Tolson in the early 1930s and his meteoric rise to the associate directorship of the Bureau are therefore worthy of note, as was Tolson’s declining health in the mid-1960s. By the early 1970s, when the FBI’s public image had begun to unravel, a diminished Tolson lacked the physical capacity to act as Hoover’s most ardent defender.

This is a book about Hoover’s PR men, the people who operationalized the FBI’s public relations–defined image from 1935 until 1973 when, about a year after Hoover’s death, Milton Jones retired and the Crime Research/Records Section was disbanded by Acting Director L. Patrick Gray III, who was probably concerned about the section’s outsized influence within the organization. If public relations is the building and maintenance of communities of meaning with the potential for action writ large, then the FBI was a
remarkably successful public relations pioneer. Defenders who were convinced that their personal identities were commingled with the fate of Hoover stepped up to amplify and promote the Bureau’s public image whenever needed. At the height of the director’s power, from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, most all Americans could provide a coherent explanation of the Bureau’s importance and of Hoover’s sturdy, admirable character. Thanks to a never-ending deluge of positive portrayals of the FBI in news and entertainment media, serious questions about the Bureau’s actions were routinely chalked up to the ravings of radicals and extremists. There can be no doubt about the impact of the FBI’s efforts to define itself from 1935 to 1973.

Beginning just fifteen years after theatrical promoter Edward L. Bernays and his wife, Doris Fleischman, coined the term public relations as describing an activity in which the understanding of the audience members helps shape the messages they are sent, the FBI began practicing sophisticated public relations. From Nichols to Jones to DeLoach to Tolson, Hoover’s PR men internalized the Bureau’s preferred public image to the point where it became integrated into their own identities. They then sold that image to journalists, to entertainment executives, and to an overwhelming majority of Americans. Dissent was not tolerated within the Bureau, so over time, the FBI became a monolithic organization of thousands of agents who lived and breathed the agency’s public relations message, image, and worldview. Hoover’s PR men in Washington became the enforcers and amplifiers of the director’s views. Their individual talents—Nichols’s bend-your-ear networking, Jones’s meticulous analysis, Stukenbroeker’s eloquence, DeLoach’s ambition and charm, and Tolson’s protective, mother-hen instincts—created and maintained the FBI’s remarkable public relations successes. Those talents become clear only through an examination of who Hoover’s PR men were and how they worked through public relations challenges. By studying moments when they influenced public perceptions of the Bureau, we can understand more about how public relations trumpeted the law enforcement high points and obscured the domestic surveillance low points of the J. Edgar Hoover era.