

## *Book Reviews*

Anthony Summers. *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1993. 528pp, ill.

In the wake of the Watergate scandal Congressional committees disclosed a number of illegal political activities of the American intelligence community during the Cold War. Aided by a strengthened Freedom of Information Act, several studies have been produced especially about the Federal Bureau of Investigation, documenting how the bureau attempted to promote a conservative agenda by surveillance and harassment of political minorities, cooperation with political allies, and blackmailing and deceiving Presidents and Attorney Generals. Much interest has been focused on J. Edgar Hoover, the legendary Director of the FBI 1924 until 1972 and arguably the most powerful nonelected official in US history. *Official and Confidential* is the fourth biography within the last few years (following Richard Gid Powers' *Secrecy and Power*, 1987; Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox: *The Boss. J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition*, 1988; and Curt Gentry's *J. Edgar Hoover. The Man and the Secrets*, 1991).

Anthony Summers is a former journalist for the BBC who has specialized in a varied assortment of sensational but dubious conspiracy theories: In *The File of the Tsar* he claimed that the Tsar family was not murdered but escaped the Communists in 1918; in *Conspiracy* he argued that President Kennedy was killed by a cabal consisting of CIA, the Mafia, and Cuban Exiles; and in "Goddess" it was Marilyn Monroe who fell victim to a sinister plot. *Official and Confidential* is much in the same vein. As an investigating journalist, Summers, according to his own estimate, tracked down some 850 witnesses and his interviews with them constitute the major source for *Official and Confidential*.

The fundamental problems with the book are manifest both in regard to the methods employed and the use of the genre. Summers seldom seems to have made any systematic attempt to distinguish between first-hand and second-hand knowledge or to question the motives of his witnesses, but he mostly seems to accept the accounts at face value, at least when they suit his purposes, and it is simply impossible for the reader to judge the credibility of his witnesses. (A checking of Summers' sources

is made extremely difficult by the way the footnotes are organized—they are packed together chapter for chapter without any footnote numbers).

As for the use of the genre, ideally, the informed biography often explains how the individual was influenced by his time and interacted with his surroundings, whereas the more superficial biography often tends to over personify complex problems and uses the individual's character as the sole determining factor. Unfortunately, *Official and Confidential* falls in the latter category. For example, the FBI's campaign against Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement in the 1960s is simply explained as a result of Hoover's insecurity, brought on by his alleged fear that he himself might have had black blood (pp. 349-351). Though this might account to some extent for the vehemence of Hoover's personal hatred toward King, it hardly explains the more fundamental reasons behind the FBI's continuous surveillance of radical and more moderate black leaders and organizations dating back as far as 1916 and its connection to the larger political culture.

The same is true about Summers' main thesis, that Hoover lived a secret double life as a homosexual and transvestite, and that the Mafia found out and used its knowledge to blackmail him. This explanation for the curious fact that until the late fifties Hoover not only avoided fighting organized crime but even denied its very existence is neat but problematic. First, the contention that Hoover had an affair with Clyde Tolson, the Assistant Director at the FBI, is by no means new but was widely circulated in his own time and was primarily based on the fact that Hoover never married but maintained a close companionship with Tolson for some 45 years. Perhaps the rumors were true (a lot of people were more than eager to believe them—and recount them for Summers), but if so Summers has not substantiated them merely by rehearsing second-hand allegations. Previous, and less sensational biographers have treated them just as that—unsubstantiated allegations.

Secondly, Summers' claim that the Mafia blackmailed Hoover rests on equally shaky ground. His allegation that the OSS had revealing pictures of Hoover and Tolson in its possession is based on the contradictory statements by two witnesses of unknown credibility, and the argument that the Mafia got hold of them is only supported by Mafia gossip and in no way made credible. And perhaps the most sensational charge in *Official and Confidential*, that Hoover participated in orgies as a transvestite, is based solely on the testimony of the former wife of a

bootlegger, who according to Peter Maas ("Setting the Record Straight", *Esquire*, May 1993, 56-59), held a grudge against Hoover, had tried to sell her story for years before Summers turned up, and was considered to be unreliable by New York authorities.

How, then, is one to explain Hoover's turning the blind eye to the Mafia? Summers notes that other explanations have been offered but brushes them aside as unsatisfactory and hurries on to his more racy stories (p. 230). However, Hoover did have other less spectacular reasons for ignoring the existence of the Mafia. First, historically the FBI has always ignored the more complex and insoluble crimes and instead focused on the more easily solved crimes, such as car thefts and bank robberies, thus creating an image of efficiency. Second, one source of Hoover's power was his autonomy, which was more important to him than mere bureaucratic expansion: Those who wanted an open attack on organized crime demanded the creation of a National Crime Commission or Interagency Task Force, thereby threatening Hoover's complete control over the FBI. For Hoover to acknowledge the existence of the Mafia would present the FBI with an inextricable problem and probable loss of full freedom of action, in short, the ultimate nightmare of any ambitious bureaucrat.

*Official and Confidential* is an interesting example of how an intensive marketing campaign can make even an extremely questionable book into a bestseller and capture the headlines. Among other things, the book was promoted with an accompanying documentary shown on national TV ("The Secret File on J. Edgar Hoover," PBS, February 9, 1993) and full-page ads in major newspapers ("At last, the truth about J. Edgar Hoover", *The New York Times*, February 22, 1993, p. A18). Its anecdotal style and exposure of the follies of the rich and famous from Eleanor Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy makes for entertaining reading. It contributes little to an understanding of the political power of Hoover and the FBI and its connection to the larger forces and currents in modern American society.

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