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SECRECY AND POWER:

The Life of

J. Edgar Hoover

by Richard Gid Powers

Free Press, 1987

624 pp. \$27.95

It is hard to believe that there may now be millions of younger Americans for whom the name J. Edgar Hoover conjures up nothing at all. He died in Washington, D.C., at the age of 77, on May 2, 1972—still firmly in charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which he had led for nearly five decades and built up from a puny, scandal-ridden unit into one of the most formidable agencies in the history of American govern-

ment. His death provoked rejoicing on the Left, mourning on the Right, and, for reasons made clear by Richard Gid Powers, a historian at the City University of New York's College of Staten Island, a long sigh of relief from the vast majority in the center.

With his varied reputation for good and evil, long colored by the passions of U.S. political life, it has taken time to get a cool fix on the man and his legacy. Powers's book signals the emergence of a critical but dispassionate perspective. Balanced and carefully researched, *Secrecy and Power* is both illuminating political biography and very good reading.

The heart of the book is Powers's account of the relations between Hoover's FBI and a series of administrations, beginning with Calvin Coolidge's and lasting through Richard Nixon's. It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Powers notes, who turned the FBI into a powerful—if potentially troublesome—force of political police; during the mid-1930s, worried about Nazi infiltration, FDR secretly removed "all effective restraints from Hoover's surveillance of the American political scene." Relations were not always smooth. President Nixon's subordinates tried—unsuccessfully—to take over the FBI's coordination of intelligence on domestic protest groups during the Vietnam War.

Powers retells familiar tales, such as the Bureau's colorful, carefully staged shootouts with John Dillinger and other infamous gangsters of the 1930s. Less praiseworthy was the Bureau's management of the now-notorious U.S. counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO (1956–71), which aimed to destroy through "dirty tricks" what little was left of the Communist Party after the McCarthy era. Unfortunately, thanks to ineptitude on the part of the Bureau, some of its agents ended up engaging in illegal actions (such as wiretapping and infiltration) against civil rights activists and other political dissenters (among others, the Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society, and New Left groups) during the stormy late 1960s, thereby damaging the public's confidence in the FBI's good sense and trustworthiness.

Perhaps the most interesting parts of Powers's book, however, are those dealing with the unfamiliar—with Hoover's early life and with the

launching of his career. Hoover was born (on January 1, 1895) into bureaucracy. He lived his entire life at its epicenter: Washington, D.C. Both his father and grandfather had jobs in lower echelons of the civil service. The institutions that counted in his education were the pillars of old-stock Protestant America: the church, the Sunday school (which he later described as a "crime prevention laboratory"), and the public schools. Class valedictorian at Washington's Central High School and a member of its champion debating team, he also captained the school's marching cadets at Woodrow Wilson's inaugural parade in 1913. Hoover put himself through night courses at George Washington University Law School by toiling at a tedious clerical job at the Library of Congress.

By the spring of 1919, at the age of 24, armed with a law degree, he was employed as an attorney at the Justice Department. Man, moment, and milieu then propitiously merged. The Russian Revolution, and the promises of worldwide upheaval emanating from Moscow, made 1919 the year of America's first great "red scare." A general strike in Seattle, an unprecedented rash of attempted terrorist bombings, and anti-Bolshevik hearings in Washington brought the menace home. On June 2, 1919, a bomb destroyed the front of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's house. Enraged, Palmer turned to young Hoover to head up a new, concerted antiradical campaign.

Hoover immediately threw himself into researching three important legal briefs intended to destroy communist activity in the United States. He argued successfully that, among other things, every member of the Communist Party should be held responsible for the group's doctrines, namely its commitment to overthrowing the government by nonparliamentary means. He also organized research facilities for the Justice Department's newly formed Radical Division, hired its staff, and began "collecting information on radical publications, organizations, and individuals." In the course of his work, he gave shape to the antipathy toward communism that strongly flavored mid-20th-century American politics. As Powers shows, 50 years after filing his influential briefs, Hoover still cited them as "the essential blueprints" for the nation's fight against communism.

In 1924, Hoover took over the FBI, a small agency then tarnished by its involvement in the Teapot Dome scandals, which had rocked Warren G. Harding's administration. Modeling himself on Herbert Hoover (no relation), J. Edgar "identified himself as one of the new breed of progressive



managers who were applying the methods of science to the old problems of government." He quickly turned the FBI into one of the most respected agencies of government: effective, independent, and free of corruption.

Yet Powers judges Hoover's historical legacy as "profoundly ambiguous." His successes were impressive. He achieved his life's goal of destroying American communism (although, it could be argued, it was doomed to failure anyway). He pioneered new techniques of criminal investigation, and in cooperation with state and local authorities, brought into being the modern American system of law enforcement. He devoted enormous energy to upholding traditional values as he understood them. Unfortunately, his attachment to these values sometimes led him to support racial and other injustices. The qualities of leadership that had stood him in good stead for most of his life were strangely at odds with the cultural changes of the post-World War II era. In the end, says Powers, J. Edgar Hoover "endured too long."

—Michael J. Lacey
Secretary, American Society and Politics Program

**THE LAUNCHING OF
MODERN AMERICAN
SCIENCE,
1846-1876**

by Robert V. Bruce
Knopf, 1987
434 pp. \$30

Early practitioners of science in America were, in the best sense of the word, amateurs—often notable statesmen as well as gifted *savants*. American products of the 18th-century Enlightenment probed the natural world confident that informal research would uncover its underlying laws. Thus Benjamin Franklin experimented with his kite during lightning storms to demonstrate the fluidity of electricity, while Thomas Jef-

ferson studied and catalogued American plants and animals, refuting the theory that they were inferior to European species.

Such early endeavors—isolated, sporadic, eclectic—had little organized support in the country as a whole. Indeed, few colleges in the United States offered regular courses devoted to scientific training until Yale founded the Sheffield Scientific School in 1846.

Only by mid-century did American science begin acquiring an institutional base. National pride and enthusiasm for collaboration combined—in three short decades—to create museums, colleges, and government agencies necessary for a solid scientific establishment. Bruce, historian emeritus at Boston University, frames his account of this rapid evolution with the 1846 founding of the Smithsonian Institution on the one side and the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia—which displayed crude telephones and electric lights to a curious public—on the other.