

J. Edgar Hoover ran the Federal Bureau of Investigation for almost half a century, from 1924 at age 29 until his death in 1972. For the vast majority of that time, the American people held Hoover in high regard as the nation's clean, tough, and efficient defender against both criminals and communists. But within a few years of his death, his reputation suffered lasting damage as the public became aware of the FBI's long history of unlawful surveillance—mail openings, telephone taps, and burglaries to install microphones and gather information (as well as other questionable practices). While the unconstitutional nature of such surveillance without search warrants seems paramount today, until the early 1960s most citizens—had they known about them—would probably have supported those efforts against criminals and communists. By 1966, realizing that times had changed and the American people would no longer approve of such methods, Hoover had reduced the number of FBI wiretaps and microphone installations and prohibited the FBI from engaging in mail openings and warrantless entries (burglaries/black bag jobs).

Two individuals who knew and would later speak and write about J. Edgar Hoover were Bill Sullivan and Mark Felt. Sullivan joined the FBI in 1941 and Felt in 1942. Sullivan was transferred from the field to FBI headquarters in 1945 and was put in charge of Domestic Intelligence in 1961. Felt was moved to FBI headquarters in 1962 and was placed over the Inspection Division in 1964. Each of them rose to the position of being the official number three man in the FBI, Sullivan in 1970 and Felt in 1971, with Felt replacing Sullivan in that spot. Each, in becoming number three, actually became the number two man in the FBI, because the official number two, Clyde Tolson, had been seriously debilitated in recent years by a series of strokes.

While both men saw good and bad in Hoover, Sullivan was highly negative in his overall attitude toward him and Felt highly positive. Neither man, by the way, was critical of warrantless surveillance but viewed it as a legitimate and necessary form of intelligence gathering—no surprise coming from career FBI men of that era. The first part of each of the paired portions below consists of topics and excerpts from a letter Sullivan wrote to Hoover when he left the FBI, a letter spelling out his grievances; the second part of each pairing contains an excerpt from Felt's memoir that offers his own positive perspective on the same topic.

Sullivan and Felt on J. Edgar Hoover

(A Letter from William C. Sullivan to J. Edgar Hoover, dated October 6, 1971, found in Appendix C of *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI*, by William C. Sullivan with Bill Brown, W. W. Norton & Co., 1979, pages 266, 268-269, 271, 273, 276-277; *The FBI Pyramid: From the Inside*, by W. Mark Felt, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979, pages 47, 121, 196-197, 204-205. The topics below are taken from Sullivan's letter of October 6, 1971.)

Your Books, Free Services at Your Home, and the FBI's Budget

Sullivan: As you know I had a number of men working for many months writing this book [*Masters of Deceit*] for you [Hoover]. Contrary to what you have said it was not done on private time. It was done on public time, during the day at the taxpayers' expense. This is why I recommended to you that the profit from it be given to some heart or cancer

research association. But it wasn't and not only until recently did I learn that you put some thousands of dollars in your own pocket... The same was true with the second book we wrote: *A Study in Communism*.

...Whether you know it or not there has always been critical comment about the free services year in and year out you receive at your home which the taxpayer pays for. For example, the building of the porch on your home, the care by the [FBI] laboratory of all electrical appliances, etc. The expensive gifts you received, as you know, caused grumbling and, in fact, years ago I believe letters were sent to the press complaining. ...Your \$30,000 cars and your taking money for the books that the men wrote have all been criticized. I think you should stop all this for your own good. You have always told us: "It is not enough to be right. You must look right also."

...In the mid-forties when the membership of the [Communist] Party was about 80,000 and it had many front organizations you publicized this widely month in and month out. In fact it was far too widely publicized to the point where you caused a Communist scare in the Nation which was entirely unwarranted. You had your staff of writers in the Crime Records Division (a "front" of your own to conceal huge public relations and propaganda operations which no government Bureau should have) turning out hundreds of articles on the great "dangers of" and "serious threat" of Communism to our national security. You never seemed to be that concerned with organized crime. I am just as much opposed to Communism as you but I knew then and I know now that it was not the danger you claimed it was and that it never warranted the amounts of the taxpayer's dollar spent upon it. I stand condemned for not making an issue of it at that time. What happened when the Communist Party went into a rapid decline? You kept the scare campaign going just the same for some years. However, when the membership figures kept dropping lower and lower you instructed us not to give them out to the public any more and not even to the Justice Department. I told you at one time we should publish the low figures and let the Bureau get credit for a job well done and point out how successfully Communism can be met in a democratic society but you would have none of it. At the time of my leaving the Bureau this week the membership figures of the Communist Party are down to an amazing 2800 in a nation of over 200 million people and you still conceal this from the people. Of the 2800 only about half are active and wholly ineffective. I think it is a terrible injustice to the citizens and an unethical thing for you to do to conceal this important truth from the public. You keep complaining that in my lectures I downgrade the Communist Party. Had I remained in the Bureau any longer I would, contrary to your instructions, have told the public about the tiny 2800 membership of the Communist Party. I stand condemned for not doing so before, despite your instructions not to do so. You will recall that on October 12, 1970, speaking before the conference of UPI editors at Williamsburg I told them the Party was not the cause of and did not direct or control the racial and student unrest in the Nation. On my return to Headquarters you were furious and gave me hell for what you called "downgrading the Communist Party" and you raised with me how were you going to get appropriations wanted if I kept doing that. We do not need to get appropriations that way. Further, if there is no longer a Communist problem we should not spend money on it. In fact, I have for some years been taking men off Communist work in the field and here at Headquarters and putting them on some important work.

...Our budget goes up each year. Does it really need to? Why not take a good hard look at it? It could easily be reduced by 2 or 3 million dollars in one year. We are very, very wasteful in some ways. We have become accustomed to luxury. We should return to that which is necessary only.

Felt: Hoover respected the taxpayers from whose pocket FBI funds were appropriated. The FBI budget was one of the most tightly controlled in the Government and Hoover was perhaps the only administrator in Washington history to return unexpended funds to the Treasury at the end of the fiscal year. "I must explain every item in our budget and how the money is used," he once said. "I never want any secret fund, a lump-sum appropriation for which I don't have to account. I want to account for every cent because an unexplained fund is dangerous." Hoover's economies resulted in an atmosphere at every level of the Bureau which produced respect for the taxpayers' money.

It was alleged that Bureau personnel and materials were frequently used for work done at the Hoover residence. The allegation was half true—Bureau personnel did do maintenance and installation work at Hoover's home. In every instance, however, Hoover meticulously paid for the cost of materials. ...as head of America's counterespionage apparatus it would have been extremely unwise to have allowed non-Bureau workmen into his home who might have installed microphones for Soviet or Soviet bloc countries. ...Hoover had numerous threats against his life which necessitated unusual precautions.

The FBI and the Negro

Sullivan: For good reason we used to be referred to as the "Lily White" FBI. We should have hired Negro agents and clerks many years ago but you absolutely refused. Years ago you told me yourself you were opposed to it adamantly, and the remark was attributed to you: "There will never be a Negro Special Agent as long as I am Director of the FBI." This is not only prejudice of the worst kind it is also poor leadership and impractical. You know well, especially in recent years, we could not properly discharge our responsibilities in Negro communities; therefore, more than one federal crime over which we had jurisdiction went uninvestigated. It is no wonder that the average Negro does not like the FBI. He had no reason to. Police departments in the south had the good judgment to hire Negro police officers long before we did. I tried a test case years ago and tried to get the son (college graduate) of an elevator lady (colored) hired as a special agent. I failed. He was turned down. The Department of Justice had to push you into hiring Negro agents. Your defense at the time was you had some Negro special agents, 4 or 5. Of course you did. They were your chauffeurs who were made special agents by you during the War so they would not be drafted... We have some 8000 men and, as I recall, still only 70 odd Negro special agents. This is one of the most shameful chapters in the history of the FBI...

Felt: ...the Bureau's ranks [circa 1962] were as open to qualified blacks—from either the South or the North—as they were to everyone else. The Bureau was actively trying to recruit qualified Agent applicants from minority groups... The number of black FBI Agents has always been small—and probably will be for some time to come—because those with

the necessary qualifications have chosen to move into better paying or more prestigious jobs. Bobby Kennedy tried to force Hoover to accept unqualified blacks, but the Director stood firm. He was not going to lower standards just to please the Kennedy Administration.

FBI and Organized Crime

Sullivan: Here is where we should concentrate more time, money, and brains. It was not so many years ago we refused to admit the existence of the Mafia or Cosa Nostra. In fact, the Criminal Division said it did not exist in this country. You will remember the monograph which I had charge of preparing which definitely proved from our own files that it did exist. You will recall the big meeting [in November 1957] of the nation's top hoodlums at Apalachin [in New York state]—over 30 in number. Was it not astonishing that we in the FBI had no idea they were to meet and did not know who they were? We had to then put on a big public relations show to indicate how much we did “know” and how much we had done in the field and how much we had helped the police to get convictions. It was accepted. Our public relations operations with all 50 odd field offices working with Headquarters has no equal anywhere. With all our mistakes and poor work we could never have survived without it. Incidentally, remember the monograph on the Mafia that was sent to the [Justice] Department before you really knew the dynamite that was in it? You then ordered that we get it back from the Department quickly before the higher officials knew about it. Also, do you recall it did not at first go to the field offices because you did not want the agents to know the unpleasant truth?

Felt: The Salt Lake City office was one of the smaller ones, but it included Las Vegas and Reno—and it was here that I became a part of the FBI push against the Mafia. It has been charged that Hoover did not move against organized crime until forced to by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. I know differently because, in 1956, as SAC [Special Agent in Charge] of a field office whose territory included Nevada, I was under continual pressure from the Seat of Government [FBI headquarters in D.C.] to move against Mafia infiltration of the gambling casinos in Reno and Las Vegas. Without adequate laws such as the Congress enacted in the Sixties, we could do little more than gather information through the use of informants and electronic surveillance, and this is how we discovered that the underworld owners of the gambling casinos were not informing federal and state authorities of the full extent of their profits—or “skimming.”

FBI and Politics

Sullivan: This topic I have saved until the last because it has done more than anything else to bring on my disillusionment with the FBI. Like so many young men before I entered the FBI I thought the FBI was the epitome of purity and that you were about as flawless a leader that can be found. I held on to this belief while I was in the field offices despite stories told me by old agents. I held on to it for a long time after I returned to Headquarters as a supervisor. This again despite stories that the FBI was the most political agency in government and that you were completely immersed with politics with every administration. I do not have to go into detail. I saw example after example of how you

willingly served any powerful figure in another influential office. While you are extremely conservative yourself I noticed it did not matter whether the political figure was liberal or conservative, if it served your cuds, you were eager to act. It did not matter whether it was a Republican or a Democrat or whether the Administration in power was Republican or Democrat. I saw clearly at last that the FBI always presented to the American public as non-political, as being outside, above and beyond politics, was just the contrary. It was immersed in politics and even went so far as to conduct purely political investigations and inquiries. At times, it seemed that when we were not asked to perform politically we sought opportunities to do so. I was so concerned about this under Mr. Johnson's administration that I wrote you a letter and expressed my concern and urged that the FBI not be used politically. Again, you are not the sole blame here. We who helped you inside the Bureau to carry out such activities must share the blame. And, the politicians who used the FBI must also share the blame.

Felt: Hoover was the complete Director—self-assured and totally in command. He had no ambition to rise politically and repeatedly fought off attempts to expand the FBI's jurisdiction beyond what he knew were its capabilities. He knew the political game and played it to the hilt in his relations with Presidents, Attorneys General, and the Congress, but his goal never went beyond greater independence for the FBI—and for himself as its creator and Director. He basked in the power and the adulation which his position brought and in the perquisites which went with it. I am sure he was proud and pleased to be the only official besides the President to have an armored limousine. This extra protection for Hoover was provided when he personally led raids against gangsters in the Thirties and as a result received numerous threats against his life. He was continually a recipient of threats.

Critics of J. Edgar Hoover forget that he was called in to clean out a corrupt and politics-ridden Bureau of Investigation. This was not only because of his reputation for efficiency and administrative ability but also because of a moral streak in him—a morality which was basically puritanical. He would tolerate no financial or sexual looseness among his subordinates—once firing a male clerical employee who had allowed his girl friend to spend the night with him. But he carried his morality well beyond this. His difficulty in adjusting to the Kennedy Administration stemmed partly from his scorn of JFK's philandering. Personality differences set up a barrier with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and Hoover's refusal to accept the alleged affair with Marilyn Monroe added to the antagonism. The famous confrontation with Dr. Martin Luther King was a direct result of Hoover's disgust when he learned of the civil rights leader's marathon sexual and drunken exploits.

Final Observation

Sullivan: Once again I want to say, Mr. Hoover, we are not blaming you alone. We were all part of your staff for years. We all share the blame and responsibility. This is no time for anger, recriminations or vindictiveness. There is still time to bring about progressive changes needed. I am gone now so you do not have me any longer as a "thorn in your flesh." Why don't you sit down quietly by yourself and think this all over and then get some

of the men together and work out a plan to reform, reorganize and modernize the Bureau. If you do not give reality to what to some degree has become a bubble that bubble will burst and it will be bad for all. You can still do it if you will only see the situation as it actually is and then act. It is an internal situation and it need not even get into the press. Just handle it quietly in a professional manner. This is what I hope you will do.

Mr. Hoover, if for reasons of your own you cannot or will not do this may I gently suggest you retire for your good, that of the Bureau, the intelligence community and law enforcement. More than once I told you never to retire, to stay on to the last, that you would live longer being active. It looks now that I may have been wrong. For if you cannot do what is suggested above you really ought to retire and be given the recognition due you after such a long and remarkable career in government.

Felt: Hoover was neither the paragon that his admirers proclaimed nor the ogre that his detractors held up to scorn. He was a sincere human being somewhere between the two extremes but with real greatness. He demanded loyalty but gave it in equal measure. He was given neither to false modesty nor to overbearing conceit...

Charismatic, feisty, charming, petty, giant, grandiose, brilliant, egotistical, industrious, formidable, compassionate, domineering—all these adjectives were applied to Hoover and, to a degree, they all fitted him. He had both wide recognition and detraction—and he accepted this. He was a human being.

In a time when patriotism was unfashionable, it could be said of him that he loved and believed in America. His contribution to his country was the Federal Bureau of Investigation which he fashioned into a great organization. His mortal remains lie under a modest headstone barely visible in the tangle of wild grape, weeds and fallen branches which mark Congressional Cemetery in Southeast Washington. A much more fitting recognition is his name emblazoned over the entrance to the tremendous new FBI Headquarters Building. But the real monument to his genius and dedication is the Federal Bureau of Investigation which, beleaguered though it has been, will survive and be strong because the Nation desperately needs it.