

**OFFICIAL AND
CONFIDENTIAL**

THE
SECRET
LIFE OF
J. EDGAR
HOOVER

ANTHONY
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Official and Confidential:

The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover

Anthony Summers



I thank the close colleagues and friends who made this book possible. A full Acknowledgments section will be found in its closing pages. The project lasted for five years and demanded work on a scale I could not have hoped to achieve alone. Some 850 people were interviewed, and storage of the hundreds of thousands of documents required the addition of an entire new floor to my house.

On the investigative team, I am especially grateful to Dr Kathryn Castle, lecturer in American History at the University of North London, and her husband Paul Sutton, who spent a year in the United States carrying out extensive research. In San Francisco and Washington, Ingrid Young and Glyn Wright were real Sherlocks when it came to tracking down interviewees and obscure documents. In Ireland, with the assistance of Pauline Lombard, Jeanette Woods typed and retyped the manuscript and organized the ever-expanding archive.

The book was conceived by Putnam's president, Phyllis Grann, who lived up to her reputation as a legendary publisher. Also in New York, Andrea Chambers was a redoubtable editor and Marilyn Ducksworth managed promotion with skill I have never seen equalled. Allison Hargraves, the copy editor, dealt meticulously with a mountain of detail. At Gollancz in London, Liz Knights and Joanne Goldsworthy once again proved to be loyal friends, as well as top-flight publishers. That doyen of Manhattan agents, Sterling Lord, nursed me and the first edition of the book through tough times. The new edition is the result of an initiative by Ebury's Andrew Goodfellow, helped along as it progressed to reality by my agent and friend at Curtis Brown, Jonathan Lloyd.

I shall never be able to repay the debt of gratitude I owe to Robbyn Swan, the fine Washington journalist who joined the project expecting to conduct a handful of interviews, stayed four years – and captured my heart. We married, had three children and – two decades and three marathon book projects later – she is still working with me.

To Robbyn, much more than thanks.

A.
Ireland, 2010

FOREWORD

‘The information in your book made me want to retch. I don’t think I will ever believe anything about our form of government again – nor will I have confidence in anyone in office, ever. They named a building for him and it is still there?’

*An American reader of Official and Confidential,
to the author, 1993.*

In the autumn of 2011, with the Hollywood movie *J. Edgar* in the offing, a senior FBI official spoke publicly about an aspect of what the film might – perhaps – portray. During the making of *J. Edgar* he said, director Clint Eastwood and star Leonardo DiCaprio had sought information about legendary Director Hoover’s relationship with Clyde Tolson, his longtime aide and companion.

Time was that to have addressed the question of Hoover’s sexuality would have been unthinkable in official Washington. Even now, Assistant Director Mike Kortan said only that ‘vague rumours and fabrications’ on the subject were backed up by ‘no evidence in the historical record ...’ The Society of Former Special Agents sniffed that a ‘kissing scene’ said to be in *J. Edgar* had led it to reassess the ‘tacit approval’ it had given to the movie. The J. Edgar Hoover Foundation was said to have told Eastwood that such portrayal would be ‘monumental distortion ... unfounded, spurious.’

In an era when homosexuality is out of the closet, such outrage is perhaps overheated. When the book was first published in 1993, with the impertinence to report not only on the supposed homosexuality but on other exotica, there was not only fury from FBI old-timers but also a resounding national chuckle – shared even by the President.

In March that year, Bill Clinton rose to address the annual Gridiron Club dinner in Washington D.C., traditionally an evening for topical satire. In the audience was FBI Director William Sessions then fighting a losing battle against accusations of abuse of office, and the President gave him no encouragement. ‘I might have to pick an FBI Director,’ he grinned, ‘and it’s going to be hard to fill Edgar Hoover’s ... pumps.’

Everyone understood the allusion. For the past month, since hardback publication of this book America had been tittering at the allegation that Hoover liked dressing up in women’s clothes. On television, Jay Leno and David Letterman made cracks, and the *Saturday Night Live* team performed a skit. *The New York Times* magazine devoted a serious commentary page to the implications, and John Updike penned a spoof for the *New Yorker*. In a later edition, in a reference to the transvestite in the movie *The Crying Game*, the magazine ran a cartoon featuring the ‘Jaye Edgar Hoover Building’. From left to right, the joke took on a momentum of its own. *The Nation* ran a mock advertisement for an imaginary movie called *The Lying Game*, starring Hoover in slinky evening gown and bouffant wig. In the United States and England, the tabloids phoned up photographs of the Director dressed as a woman. The London *Times* offered a verse of doggerel and, months later, *Newsweek* waded in with yet another cartoon.

The concept of Hoover in drag seems likely to become a permanent fixture in the public mind. It also made me, very evidently, Public Enemy No. 1 of diehard Hoover loyalists. ‘For your part in the success of Anthony Summers’ book,’ one told my publisher, in a letter from Texas, ‘you should han-

your head in shame. You have helped do what the Communists could never do – destroy the character of a man dedicated to the ideals on which this nation is founded.’ From Montana, an ‘outraged correspondent castigated the publisher for printing ‘libellous, totally false remarks about a great American.’ A *New Yorker* sounded off about ‘lurid and ludicrous allegations set forth by unsavory witnesses.’ Another complaint, from Brooklyn, used precisely the same phrase.

The use of identical words was no coincidence. All the letter writers quoted put pen to paper in the space of a few days, two months after the book came out. Three were former FBI agents, and the fourth was an agent’s wife. I have no doubt that their spleen was orchestrated, just as the ‘great American’ himself used to orchestrate an outpouring of complaints to members of Congress whenever there seemed the shred of a possibility that he might lose his job.

In early February 1993, when my publisher was about to launch *Official and Confidential*, an irate caller told the promotions department to watch out for an upcoming television show, on which the despicable Anthony Summers would get his come-uppance. On *Larry King Live*, sure enough, a cold and furious Cartha DeLoach, a surviving Hoover aide who features large in the book, came forth with an attack short on facts but stern as an Iranian *fatwa*. Not only was the book ‘garbage ... innuendo ... lies,’ but – and this was the intended coup de grace – I was a discredited journalist. Before the program I had spotted DeLoach hunched over a telephone, writing notes on a scrap of paper. Now, on live television beamed around the world by CNN, he read from a year-old *Washington Times* column that had accused me of lying and cowardice for my comments about a CIA official. The article was so inaccurate and malicious that, for the first time in my life, I had started libel proceedings.

Meanwhile, Lawrence Heim, of the Society of Former FBI Agents, fired off an enraged letter to the Chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting which had – like the BBC in England – broadcast a program featuring key allegations made in this book. As a major plank of his broadside Heim also cited the distortions published in the *Washington Times*. So did Thomas Weaver, a former agent who protested to *Vanity Fair*, the magazine which had published a long extract from *Official and Confidential*. Heim mailed the 8,000 members of the Former Agents’ Society an appeal for concerted action against me and my publishers. Happily, *Vanity Fair* supported me with courage and integrity, as had *Frontline*.

In May, in *Esquire* magazine, the writer Peter Maas was given three pages – in a feature euphemistically called ‘Setting the Record Straight’ – to try to demolish the parts of the book that dealt with Hoover’s sexuality, and the way it may have compromised the FBI’s duty to fight organized crime. In his attack on me, Maas claimed that one person quoted had never been interviewed, and the handling of another had been superficial. Neither accusation was true, and the ‘never interviewed’ individual had in fact been interviewed five times. The Maas piece was riven with error, yet *Esquire* denied me equal space for a rebuttal. Instead, it published a letter from me three months later alongside correspondence from three men who sided with Maas.

The press at large devoted massive coverage to *Official and Confidential*, for which I am duly grateful. Few reporters or reviewers, however, appeared to have given the book a serious reading. Most concentrated on the passages about sex, which make up a small proportion of the work. The late Stephen Ambrose, then Director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans, told *Washington Post* readers that I devoted an entire chapter to charging Hoover with responsibility for the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor. I made no such blanket charge. He wrote, too, that I implicated Hoover had a hand in the death of Marilyn Monroe – something that has never featured in the wildest imaginings of anyone I know, let alone in this book.

In the London *Sunday Times*, Anthony Howard assailed me for ascribing President Nixon

inability to remove Hoover to the Director's knowledge of the President's relationship with a woman he met in Hong Kong. Not so. I also report the many other factors that led Nixon to fear, as he himself said in a recently released Watergate tape, that – if dismissed – Hoover might 'bring down the tempo with him, including me.'

By far the loudest hoo-ha, however, was over the passage indicating that Hoover was homosexual – the information suggesting that he liked to wear female clothing on occasion and – far more important – the possibility that knowledge of such peccadilloes gave Mafia bosses a hold over the Director.

Detractors said that my sources on Hoover's sexuality were unreliable. They sniped at me for reporting the claims of Susan Rosenstiel, who said she had seen Hoover dressed as a woman, on the grounds that she was herself disreputable. They dismissed the comments of *mafiosi*, simply because they were *mafiosi*.

My sources on Hoover's sexuality include a well-authenticated eye-witness, a longtime person and friend of Hoover and his principal lover Clyde Tolson, and Hoover's psychiatrist's widow. After hardback publication, I heard from Marie Gladhill, whose father Vilhelm Buch was a Danish newspaperman based in Washington, D.C. 'Many Danes used to contact my father when they came to Washington,' Mrs Gladhill told me. 'I was present, in the early thirties, when he received a visit from a young Danish sailor about nineteen years old, who had recently been arrested – for some homosexual offense, I think. My father asked him how he had got out of jail. And the young fellow laughed and said, "Mr Hoover got me out." And he told how Hoover had taken him home with him. As if to explain, he said, "Mr Hoover is homosexual"...'.

In a speech to a writers' conference in the eighties, the novelist William Styron said that Hoover had once been spotted with his companion, Clyde Tolson, on the patio of a beach house in Malibu, California. 'There was the head of the FBI,' said Styron, 'painting the toenails of his longtime male friend.' Styron told me in 1993 that he received this information from a source he considered reliable. He believes the story to be 'absolutely true.'

Following publication of *Official and Confidential*, the *New York Post* reported that Hoover and Tolson were drawn into a 1966 probe of a nationwide extortion racket. A member of the U.S. Congress, two deans of Eastern universities, and William Church, the admiral in charge of the New York naval yards, were among the many victims of a blackmail ring that systematically entrapped homosexuals. Although not publicly named at the time, Clyde Tolson was one of the ring's targets, according to the *Post* story. A photograph of Hoover with one of the extortionists, according to the report, surfaced during the police inquiry – then vanished. While independent research has failed to confirm the account, *Post* reporter Murray Weiss said: 'I stand 100% behind everything I wrote'.

There has been a fresh development on the subject of the claim that a sex photograph of Hoover and Tolson was in the possession of James Angleton, the CIA Counter-Intelligence chief. Former intelligence officer John Weitz, like Angleton a veteran of the wartime intelligence organization OSS, revealed that it was Angleton who – years earlier – showed him a similar picture of the two men. Whether or not they were authentic, there can be little doubt that such photographs did exist, and that Angleton believed they could be used to intimidate Hoover.*

The most persistent criticism of *Official and Confidential*, however, has centered on the passage – just three pages long – in which I report the allegation by Susan Rosenstiel, a former wife of liquor millionaire Lewis Rosenstiel, that Hoover dressed in female clothes to take part in group sex with attorney Roy Cohn, her husband, and young male prostitutes. Hoover defenders maintained that Mrs Rosenstiel was not a credible source because she pleaded guilty to an attempted perjury charge in 1971. I told readers this but, unlike the critics, also explained the context. The very week the charge

was brought, the New York State Legislative Committee on Crime had planned to produce Mrs. Rosenstiel as a witness to her husband's links to the Mafia. The Committee's Chairman and Chief Counsel were outraged at the perjury development. The perjury charge was brought in connection with a 1969 civil suit – a move lawyers considered unprecedented and bizarre. Committee officials believed it was instigated by Rosenstiel himself, using his vast wealth and influence to obstruct the official inquiry by discrediting his former wife. Court records show the tycoon had used similar tactics in the recent past, to pervert the course of justice.

Those trying to discredit Mrs Rosenstiel claimed that she was 'reputedly an alcoholic with mental problems,' known as 'Snow White' in (unnamed) circles. During six years' work on *Official and Confidential*, including extended interviews with the woman, I found not a jot of evidence to support such accusations. Nor were such weaknesses even rumored until after publication of my book. On the contrary, the former Chief Counsel of the Crime Committee, New York Judge Edward McLaughlin and Committee investigator William Gallinaro, found Mrs Rosenstiel an exceptionally good witness. 'I thought her absolutely truthful,' Judge McLaughlin told me. 'The woman's power of recall was phenomenal. Everything she said was checked and double checked, and everything that was checkable turned out to be true.' Although this assessment of Mrs Rosenstiel is in this book, it was not quoted in a single newspaper.

Critic after critic, on the other hand, asserted scornfully that Mrs Rosenstiel was the only witness to speak of Hoover's alleged cross-dressing. In fact, the passage immediately following the Rosenstiel account consists of a similar report, by two witnesses who said they learned of Hoover's penchant for women's clothes at a different time and place from those described by Mrs Rosenstiel. The second two witnesses had never heard of Susan Rosenstiel, and their story was unknown to her.

Since publication, I have received FBI files on both Lewis and Susan Rosenstiel – files withheld during the years I worked on the book in spite of an early application under the Freedom of Information Act. They contain nothing to diminish belief in Mrs Rosenstiel. They do show that Hoover was interested in, and concerned about, the FBI handling of Lewis Rosenstiel, as early as 1939. They contain what appears to be the record of a first meeting between the two men in 1957, although other evidence suggests they met earlier. That year, when Rosenstiel asked to see Hoover, the Director saw him within hours. Mrs Rosenstiel alleged that Hoover brought pressure on politicians to help further her husband's business interests – and the file shows that the millionaire did lobby the Director's office about his business problems. In 1957, the unctuous Rosenstiel was assuring Hoover that 'your wish is my command.' Later, when Rosenstiel was sick, Hoover sent him flowers.

Susan Rosenstiel mentioned to me that she had once possessed a photograph of Hoover in the company of her husband's mobster friends. That she did have such evidence was confirmed following publication of this book by Mary Nichols of *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, who met Mrs Rosenstiel years ago. 'She did have suitcases of photographs that she had hauled away from her marriage with Lewis Rosenstiel,' Nichols recalled. 'The ones I saw showed Hoover, lawyer Roy Cohn and Mrs Rosenstiel, at all sorts of social events with mobsters.'

As late as 2002, the journalist and author Ronald Kessler tried over several pages of a book on the FBI Bureau to discredit both Susan Rosenstiel and the notion that Hoover's sexuality may have influenced his long failure to pursue organized crime. While striving to persuade readers that Susan Rosenstiel was a hopelessly unreliable witness, Kessler ignored statements of law enforcement professionals and others to the contrary that had appeared in the original text of this book and in an earlier version of this foreword. He quoted me as having written that another source was 'a former CIA counterintelligence chief,' an assertion that made me seem ludicrously careless, when I had in fact

written accurately that the man had been 'linked to the CIA'.

When this book was first published, Hoover loyalists even attempted to contest the undoubted fact that Hoover failed to tackle organized crime until forced to do so late in his career. For those who need further convincing, I offer comments by three authorities, two of them senior FBI veterans.

Thomas Sheer, a Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's criminal division in New York in 1983, after Hoover's death, spoke of the daunting side of the Mafia threat at that time. 'We had to take a different approach,' he said, 'because of the enormous strength of organized crime in this area. I candidly believe the end result will be devastating for the five families, but it also raises questions about what the FBI has been doing for sixty years ...'

Congressional crime consultant Ralph Salerno, interviewed in 1993, said Hoover's position 'allowed organized crime to grow very strong in economic and political terms, so that it became a much bigger threat to the wellbeing of this country than it would have been if it had been addressed much sooner. I think if they could have been attacked before they grew, before they got the wealth before they got the knowledge, organized crime could have been nipped in the bud, and never would have grown as strong as it got to be in later decades.'

Neil Welch, an FBI Agent in Charge who became a legendary fighter against organized crime after Hoover's death, praised this book. '*Official and Confidential*,' he said, 'is a powerful indictment of both the presidents and the Congress which allowed one man to have such enormous power over the nation's law enforcement machinery – with no real accountability. FBI agents in the field could have been vastly more effective in their war on crime if the issues raised by *Official and Confidential* had been responsibly addressed in the public dialogue while Hoover lived.'

Publication of this book moved a former FBI Supervisor, Laurence Keenan, to write to me about another controversial episode – Hoover's handling of the assassination of President Kennedy. Sent to Mexico City to investigate the alleged assassin's visit there before the tragedy, Keenan had returned deeply frustrated. 'I remember arriving there two or three days after the assassination,' he recalled, 'with the authority to coordinate all the investigations by the FBI and the CIA. But my attempt to talk to the witnesses was aborted. I had the authority from Director Hoover to conduct the investigation. But on having telephone contact with Washington, I realized that these orders were somewhat paper orders – not to be taken literally. My efforts were frustrated from Day One. It was agreed that I should return to headquarters and submit my report. I went in and talked to the Director, and there really wasn't too much excitement. Because this was a foregone conclusion, that the investigation for all intents and purposes should be wrapped up. Within days we could say the investigation was over. Conspiracy was a word which was *verboten*. It was not to be heard on anybody's lips. The idea that Oswald had a confederate or was part of a group or a conspiracy was definitely enough to place a man's career in jeopardy. The realization soon came to me that my efforts in Mexico City had been a window dressing. I knew the FBI had the capacity and the facilities to conduct a world-class investigation. When the FBI was told to do something and had the backing of the front office – meaning Mr Hoover – there were no limits to what we could do. However, looking back, I feel a certain amount of shame. This one investigation disgraced a great organization.'

There should be no doubt, finally, about Hoover's blackmail of politicians. In 1993, in his memoirs, former British Home Secretary Roy – now Lord – Jenkins told of an extraordinary encounter he had with the Director in 1966. 'I suppose,' Jenkins recalled, 'he did not think it much matter what he said to "Brits," and he talked with the wildest indiscretion. He denounced the Kennedys (Jack just three years dead, Bobby just two years away from being his nominal boss as Attorney General). He said he had somewhat, but not all that much, more respect for Lyndon Johnson. He implied that I

had such detailed and damning material on every U.S. politician of note, particularly those of liberal persuasion, that his position was impregnable. No one could afford to sack or discipline him. The country was in a pretty terrible state, both morally and politically, but was just about held together by FBI agents, who patrolled it like a chosen race of prefects.'

On the day the first paperback edition of this book went to press, outraged by new information about Hoover's abuse of the Congress, U.S. Senator Howard Metzenbaum introduced a bill that would remove the Director's name from the headquarters of the FBI.

There was for a while something of a vogue for attacking the very genre of investigative books about living or recently dead figures, for dismissing their authors as money-grubbing literary predators. I have no time, certainly, for the sort of book that sometimes masquerades as non-fiction. 'There is no name for writers who claim privileged access to the inner workings of people they describe,' a *Time* correspondent wrote accurately in 1993. 'The name is novelist.' Others decry books of 'pathography' as defined by Joyce Carol Oates as life stories that 'mercilessly expose their subjects' and 'relentlessly catalog their most private, vulnerable and least illuminating moments.'

I prefer Lytton Strachey's more perceptive dictum, that 'discretion is not the better part of biography.' The fact is that the glimpses we now have of Hoover's private life *are* illuminating, in a way far more important than the easy snigger with which many journalists greeted publication of *Official and Confidential*. If the allegations I published are essentially accurate, then we may have discovered why a vastly powerful figure, a law enforcement supremo who could have strangled the American Mafia in its infancy, failed in his duty. Hoover failed, according to the claims I reported, because he was compromised by his sexuality.

Many may object that the thesis is shaky, that some of those interviewed may have embroidered the facts, even made them up altogether. This is a risk for every biographer, whether an academic with letters after his name, or an investigative journalist by training, as I am. Forget, for a moment, the huffing and puffing about Susan Rosenstiel. Witnesses of total rectitude, with impeccable credentials, are known to offer false stories on occasion. Any biographer, or any lawyer, knows that.

What would my critics have me do about the testimony to Hoover's homosexuality, or to his relationships with mobsters? Leave it out, because some will not believe it, or because some deem it distasteful?

Some non-fiction authors do give the craft a bad name. There are those who do not genuinely research their material to the absolute limits of endurance, ingenuity, and available funds. Such writers pad their books with some of the appearances of professionalism, long bibliographies, and notes suggestive of scholarship. An author who once spoke to me to make an appointment but never called back, went on to claim in his source notes that he had interviewed me at length. If publishers were to ask more searching questions and insist on the disciplines, such poseurs would have to shape up or quit the profession.

There were no short cuts in the writing of this book. The pages that follow represent five years of grueling work, not least by the team of scholars and journalists I hired to help me cover the vast terrain of J. Edgar Hoover's life. Our operation cost more than half a million dollars, which consumed virtually all the publisher's generous advance. I rarely permitted one account alone to carry a pivotal element of the story, and almost always, I required buttressing testimony. I was especially cautious if information failed to fit the overall pattern. If a statement was an uncorroborated claim, I let the reader know it. The full source notes, in the hardback edition, are exhaustively thorough.

Few professional authors much like the word 'definitive,' so prodigally employed by the

publicists. History is by definition ongoing. Nevertheless, I believe I have got J. Edgar Hoover about right. As a foreigner, I had the advantage of starting the work with no bias, no feelings one way or the other about the man's virtues or sins. The result, whether people like it or not, is as honest a picture of this legendary American as the available facts, and hard work, permit.

My detractors, by contrast, used lies and distortion in their attempts to discredit me. As defenders of Hoover, they no doubt missed the irony – that their weapons were the very ones their hero used to abuse his fellow citizens for so long. One must not be scared by their ranting, although we should be troubled by the influence their kind have over so much of the American media.

Over my desk, at home in Ireland, I keep a framed cartoon. It depicts a firing squad standing, rifle ready and aimed – at a typewriter. As these pages show, J. Edgar Hoover believed he could use his power to silence the press, to crush individual writers and thinkers, and to smother truth. Yet, even at the height of his power, there were always a few writers tapping away somewhere, irritating the hell out of him with their protest. May the oppressors always be so irritated. May the writers never be silenced.

Anthony Summerlin
Co. Waterford, Ireland, 1994 & 2001

* See Chapter 23

October 1971, the Oval Office of the White House

The President of the United States, his Attorney General and key advisers are wrestling with an intractable problem. The problem is an old man, a man of whom the Chief of State is afraid.

RICHARD NIXON: For a lot of reasons he oughta resign ... He should get the hell out of there ... Now it may be, which I kind of doubt ... maybe I could just call him and talk him into resigning ... There are some problems ... If he does go he's got to go of his own volition ... that's why we're in a hell of a problem ... I think he'll stay until he's a hundred years old.

JOHN MITCHELL: He'll stay until he's buried there. Immortality ...

RICHARD NIXON: I think we've got to avoid the situation where he can leave with a blast ... We may have on our hands here a man who will pull down the temple with him, including me ... It's going to be a problem.¹

Seven months later, on May 2, 1972, the President's 'problem' proved to be mortal after all. J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, died in office at the age of seventy-seven. The body was reportedly found by his housekeeper, lying beside the four-poster in the bedroom of his Washington home. It looked like just another nighttime heart attack, and there would be no autopsy.

Yet someone in Washington – someone powerful – felt threatened by Hoover even in death. The undertakers, arriving at the house to remove the corpse, were met with an extraordinary sight. At the foot of the stairs, in a straightbacked chair, an elderly man sat staring blankly into space. Coming and going around him, moving in and out of the rooms, were a number of younger men – intent on a mysterious task.

Just four hours after the discovery of the body, the men were searching the house from top to bottom. They were rifling through drawers, taking books off the shelves one by one, leafing through the pages, then moving on. The old man in the chair, the dead man's closest male friend – his lover, according to some – seemed oblivious to what they were doing.

The next day, J. Edgar Hoover's body was carried with great ceremony to the U.S. Capitol, where he lay in state on the black bier that once had borne Abraham Lincoln and eight other presidents. Inside, citizens filed past to pay their last respects, at a rate of a thousand an hour. Outside, a few hundred protesters were listening to a 'war liturgy' – a reading of the names of the 48,000 Americans who had been killed in Vietnam.

Mingling with the protesters were ten men from the Nixon White House, on a mission to provoke fights and disrupt the rally. They included several Cuban exiles who had been involved in previous illegal break-ins, and who were soon to be caught red-handed at the Watergate. As they stood waiting that night, just yards from the Capitol where the dead man lay, two of the men talked about Hoover.

What one of them said astonished his comrade. Hoover's home, he confided, had been the target of a recent burglary inspired by the White House. Then he clammed up. To reveal more, he said, would be 'dangerous.'

The previous day, in the Oval Office, President Nixon is said to have greeted the news of Hoover's death with prolonged silence, then: 'Jesus Christ! That old cocksucker!' Other than that, an aide recalled, he showed no emotion at all.

For public consumption, Nixon treated the death of J. Edgar Hoover as the passing of an American hero. It was he who ordered that Hoover should lie in state at the Capitol – the first civil servant ever to be so honored. He eulogized Hoover as ‘one of the giants ... a national symbol of courage, patriotism, and granite-like honesty and integrity.’

To millions of Americans, Hoover was a hero. Long ago, in the twenties, he had virtually created the FBI. He had rebuilt and expanded it, in a brilliant reorganization that left him poised for fame as the ‘Number One G-Man,’ nemesis of the bandits of the Midwest – Dillinger, Machine Gun Kelly, Alvin ‘Creepy’ Karpis and Baby Face Nelson.

Later, Hoover became much more than the nation’s top lawman. Charged by President Roosevelt with protecting the internal security of the United States, he emerged as the nation’s champion against its most insidious foes: first the Nazis, then his enemies of choice, the Communists, and all who dared voice political dissent.

Endless publicity had made Hoover a living icon, showered with honors in his own time. President Truman awarded him the Medal for Merit for ‘outstanding service to the United States.’ President Eisenhower chose him as the first-ever recipient of the Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service, the highest honor a civil servant could receive.

The very name Hoover became synonymous with the safety of the nation, with the core values of American society, and – though few dared say so publicly – with fear. Like many of the eight presidents Hoover served, Richard Nixon had known that fear. His relationship with the Director had been long and filled with irony. As a gangly young man, he himself had applied to be a Special Agent in Hoover’s FBI. As a fledgling congressman, he had ridden to success on the crusade against the Left that Hoover had largely inspired. He had found favor, been given a helping hand, had supped with Hoover at his favorite watering holes. He and the old man shared enemies, secrets and hunger for power. When, finally, the younger man came to the presidency, the pinnacle Hoover himself had once yearned to reach, the two had seemed natural allies.

Yet President Nixon, in his turn, had collided with Hoover. Early on, the elderly Director had become impossible to live with. He cut off liaison with all other intelligence agencies. For reasons of self-preservation rather than principle, he sabotaged the President’s battle plan for an intelligence offensive against radical activists. Then he enraged Nixon by soft-pedaling the investigation of Daniel Ellsberg, the government analyst who leaked Vietnam War documents to the press. His erratic public performance made him an embarrassment to the administration. Despite all this, Richard Nixon did not dare fire him.

The President tried to do so, on several occasions. In the fall of 1971, aware that Nixon had summoned Hoover for a showdown meeting, officials sat watching the clock, waiting for news that the Director had finally been forced out of office. The news never came. Though Nixon has never admitted it, the old man fought off disaster with his most trusty weapon: knowledge.

Recently released White House transcripts reveal that the President and his aides were squirming with worry over the damage Hoover could do. On Nixon’s orders, aides scurried to retrieve incriminating documents – proving the President had ordered the bugging of newsmen – ‘before Hoover blows the safe.’ There were a string of other reasons to be afraid. Hoover, it seems, was aware of some of the White House crimes that preceded Watergate. He even had personal information on Nixon – potential scandal involving a woman.

The Director knew Richard Nixon’s sins and secrets, as he knew those of so many others. When he died, there was panic over what information might lie in his office. Nixon’s Chief of Staff scrawled a terse note: ‘... find out what’s there, who controls it – where skeletons are.’

In Congress, many senators and congressmen lived in fear of the files Hoover held on them – that they feared he held. The Freedom of Information Act has made it clear that their fears were justified. The record proves conclusively that FBI agents routinely reported in detail on the sexual activity of politicians – both hetero- and homosexual. Eyewitness testimony reveals how one prominent senator was terrorized into inaction by a reading from his own FBI file.

One of Hoover's closest colleagues, William Sullivan, was to describe him – after he was dead – as 'a master blackmailer.' Yet that is only part of the story. New evidence indicates that this immensely powerful man had a fatal flaw of his own. He was the product of a painful childhood, the son of a mentally ill father and a domineering mother, and his adult life was marred by emotional turmoil and sexual confusion. The Hoover who preached stern moral sermons to America secretly practiced homosexuality – allegedly even transvestism.

As Hoover himself repeatedly warned, homosexuals have always been prime targets for compromise by hostile intelligence agencies – not least that of Edgar's *bête noire*, the Soviet Union. So tormented was Hoover by his secret vulnerability that he once sought help from a Washington psychiatrist.

The suggestion that the blackmailer was blackmailed, though, comes from a different and startling direction. Why, many have asked, did Hoover long neglect pursuit of the most insidious criminal force of all – the Mafia? Several mob figures now assert that, as they understood it, Hoover posed no threat. He and top organized crime figures had 'an understanding.'

Early in Hoover's career, according to mob interviews, he was trapped by his own homosexuality. Mafia boss Meyer Lansky, who specialized in the use of damaging information to manipulate men in public life, had reportedly obtained compromising evidence – probably photographs. Thereafter, until the Kennedy brothers attacked organized crime, Lansky bragged privately that Hoover had been 'fixed.'

Behind his mask of public rectitude, it is now evident that this American hero was corrupt. He lived 'like an oriental potentate,' as a former Deputy Attorney General put it, milking FBI funds and facilities for his private profit and pleasure. Wealthy friends favored him with lavish hospitality and investment tips, and he apparently protected them from criminal investigation.

In the FBI's oppression of civil rights activists and liberals, Hoover's personal venom comes into focus. His rage over the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Martin Luther King, Jr., was the greatest because – for years previously – he had indulged the conceit that he himself deserved the Prize. His fury over criticism by comedian Dick Gregory led him to issue orders designed to trigger a mob attack on the entertainer.

Perhaps an alert public should have realized at the time that Hoover's image was too good to be true. Yet in large measure because the nation's press was so timid, it did not.

'If we didn't have Mr Hoover and the FBI,' a television viewer wrote NBC shortly before the Director's death, 'I would like to know how you and I would exist.' Many ordinary citizens expressed such sentiments.

Others differed. The poet Theodore Roethke called Hoover 'the head of our thought police – martinet, a preposterous figure, but not funny.' Hoover's FBI, wrote novelist Norman Mailer, was 'the high church for the mediocre.' 'It was a relief,' said pediatrician Benjamin Spock on hearing of Hoover's death, 'to have this man silenced who had no understanding of the underlying philosophy of our government or of our Bill of Rights, a man who had such enormous power, and used it to harass individuals with whom he disagreed politically and who had done as much as anyone to intimidate millions of Americans out of their right to hear and judge for themselves all political opinions.'

A former Assistant Attorney General under President Johnson, Mitchell Rogovin, thought Hoover's life had been 'a passion play of good and evil. And when there was good, it was hollow.'

What manner of man stirred such different responses? He came to be regarded, the *New York Post* once said, 'with the same awe and reverence accorded the other monuments of Washington. Only he was closed to the public.' That a man with a crippled psyche, capable of great evil, became the trusted symbol of all that was safe and good is a paradox of our time. So too is the fact that, in a tribute after Hoover's death, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger said he had 'epitomized the American dream,' while renowned psychiatrists consider he would have been well suited for high office in Nazi Germany.

In spite of all the damaging information that has emerged about Hoover in recent years, and in spite of congressional motions to remove the words 'J. Edgar Hoover' from the wall of the FBI headquarters, the building still bears that name, in gold lettering, as though nothing had changed.

To explore such contradictions is to make a vital journey through the twentieth century, a time of deception and selfdeception about our values, our freedoms and our heroes. Perhaps, because the man's life spanned a period in which the American dream went so badly wrong, understanding his life may help us to understand ourselves.

To bring him into mortal perspective, J. Edgar Hoover – the child and the man – will remain 'Edgar' throughout this book. His story began on a freezing New Year's morning, more than a hundred years ago.

‘The Child is father of the Man.’

William Wordsworth

‘On Sunday January 1, 1895, at 7.30 A.M. J. Edgar Hoover was born to my father and mother, the day was cold and snowy but clear. The Doctor was Malian. I was born at 413 Seward Square, S.E. Washington, D.C ...’¹

The boy who was to become the world’s most famous police official kept a dossier on himself as a child. Edgar’s formal report on his own birth fills a page in a small leatherbound notebook, inscribed on the front, in schoolboy handwriting: ‘Mr Edgar Hoover, private.’ It was one day to lie in a muddle of memorabilia, yellowed papers and faded photographs, stored at the House of the Temple, headquarters of the Masons’ Supreme Council, Thirty-third Degree, in Washington, D.C. The text transport us into a nineteenth-century world.

Edgar was born when the Civil War was still a vivid memory, when the assassination of Abraham Lincoln was little more distant in the past than is that of President Kennedy today. The Union Lincoln had forged still had only forty-five member states. The year 1895 saw talk of war with England over territories in Latin America, and soon there would be conflict with Spain, resulting in U.S. conquest of the Philippines. Just four years before Edgar was born, the white man’s war against the Indians ended at Wounded Knee.

Edgar, who would die in the era of the jumbo jet, was born when Edison’s two inventions, his Light System and his Moving Picture Machine, were still marvels. The telephone was reserved for government officials and the wealthy. There were less than 150 miles of paved road in the nation, and only a few thousand cars. The bicycle, in exotic variety, was the fashionable thing on city streets.

American cities were already overcrowded, although the great wave of immigration was yet to come. Those earliest immigrants, the blacks, faced renewed persecution as southern states applied racist segregation laws. The morning Edgar was born, a black man was lynched by a southern mob – a common enough occurrence then.

The whitewashed frame house that was Edgar’s birthplace – a mile or so from the White House – was insulated from all these miseries. His father, Dickerson Hoover, was thirty-eight when Edgar was born, the descendant of settlers who had moved to Washington in the early nineteenth century.

Later, Edgar’s propaganda department would describe Dickerson as ‘a career man in the government service.’ This was technically true, but the post he held was not grand at all. Like his father before him, he worked as a printmaker for the government mapmaking department.

Edgar’s thirty-four-year-old mother, Anna, ‘Annie’ to intimates, had a classier background. Her forebears had served as senior local officials in the Swiss village of Klosters, now the celebrated ski resort. They had their own coat of arms and a fine ancestral home next to the church. One scion of the family had become a bishop.

Annie’s immigrant grandfather had been the first Swiss Consul General to the United States. Her grandmother, besides bearing thirteen children, had found prominence in her own right. A trained nurse known as ‘Mother Hitz,’ she had been a Florence Nightingale to wounded Union soldiers camped on Capitol Hill during the Civil War.

Edgar’s mother had a privileged upbringing – St Cecilia’s school for girls in Washington, then

convent in Switzerland. The granddaughter who probably knew her best, Dorothy Davy, remembered her as ~~‘very much a lady, a very interesting person. She was loving, but she was also very proud. Granddaddy was kindly and gentle, but she was the strong one in that combination.’~~

A family photograph shows Edgar’s father as a troubled-looking figure of the Victorian cleric class, cramped in high collar and formal dress, his bowler on his knee. His wife stands behind him, severe in high-necked blouse and dark jacket, her hair piled on top of her head, her lips tightly compressed, trying and failing to smile.

The couple’s marriage, fifteen years before Edgar’s birth, was remembered in the family as ‘the largest wedding Capitol Hill ever had.’ For Annie, such a grand affair may have been in the normal course of things. For Dickerson, of humbler stock, it was probably overwhelming.

Edgar was the last of four children. A male heir, Dickerson, Jr., had been born in 1880, followed by two daughters, Lillian and Sadie. When Edgar was conceived, his parents were still grieving over Sadie’s death at the age of three, a diphtheria victim before the age of vaccination.

The earliest photograph of Edgar shows a glum-faced little boy, hunched at his parents’ side, wearing a brass-buttoned jacket, a watch chain and knickerbockers. By one account, he was a ‘high-strung’ child, ‘sickly and excessively fearful, clinging to his mother whenever he could.’ He started at Brent Elementary School in 1901, when he was six and as Theodore Roosevelt was about to become President, and he was a star student from the start.

‘I passed 5th highest in the first year with an average of 93.8,’ Edgar was to write in his leather-bound notebook. The school reports confirm it. From Third to Eighth Grade, Edgar received ‘Excellent Plus’ or at least ‘Good’ in Arithmetic and Algebra, Grammar and Language, Penmanship and Reading, History and Civics.

Not only did the teachers report on Edgar, he made notes about *them*: ‘Miss Hinkle, 4th Grade, who raised me in discipline ... Miss Snowden who raised me intellectually [*sic*]... Miss Dalton, 8th Grade, a fine lady who raised me morally ...’ Edgar was never ever, he boasted to his notebook, kept back by the teacher after class.

When he was old enough, Edgar would walk the streets of Washington – safe in those days – to meet his father at his office. Dickerson, Sr., seems to have doted on his youngest child, and both the affection and the father’s modest origins shine through the language of a letter Edgar kept. ‘Dear old man,’ Dickerson wrote from St Louis in 1904. ‘I wish you was [*sic*] here so that I could fight you out the morning. Mamma might think you ain’t strong, but just let her try to fight you and she will find out ... Be a good boy. With a big kiss. From Papa.’

‘Don’t study too hard,’ the father wrote cheerfully. Annie was different. ‘Study hard both your lessons and your music,’ she wrote, ‘and try to be a good boy ... Was so glad to hear you were perfect in your spelling and arithmetic. Take care of everything nicely and don’t run the streets.’ Annie was strict, but according to Dorothy Davy, ‘Edgar, of all her children, was the one she spoiled.’

In 1906, the year he turned eleven, Edgar started his own ‘newspaper.’ He collected two pages of material each week, and persuaded his elder brother – then twenty-six – to type it up. Edgar called his paper *The Weekly Review*, and sold it to family and friends for one cent a copy.

The *Review* offered snippets of family news along with items about Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin. One early headline reported the marriage of the President’s daughter Alice to the Speaker of the House. Alice Roosevelt, beautiful, brave and outrageous, was the woman of the decade.

By 1908, when he was thirteen, Edgar was keeping a diary. He noted daily temperatures and cloud cover, births and deaths in the family, his income from doing odd jobs, even lists of his own hat, shoe and collar sizes.

‘All the family,’ said Edgar’s niece Dorothy, ‘had that horrible thing about organization. Everything had to be organized and catalogued, and the pictures had to be straight on the wall always. It sounds crazy, but we were all like that.’

On Sunday evenings, an old man with a flowing white beard would come to dinner. This was Great Uncle John Hitz, from Annie’s side of the family, and his visits to the Hoovers meant a solemn Bible reading session. The entire family would kneel while Uncle John, a staunch Calvinist, prayed.

Contrary to common assumption, though, neither of Edgar’s parents was especially devout. Dickerson considered himself a Lutheran. Annie fitted in but, according to Dorothy Davy, ‘she was Catholic, more or less. Edgar’s mother attended Catholic schools, and she would die with a crucifix in her hands.’ Edgar’s nephew, Fred Robinette, confirmed that Annie was ‘no Bible-thumper.’ Neither she nor her husband attended church regularly.

Out of the religious mix came anxiety and confusion. In later life, in an overwrought moment, Edgar’s sister Lillian threw the family Bible into the fire. Edgar, who publicly spoke of himself as Presbyterian, would consult with Catholic priests. One day, he too would abuse the Bible. In childhood, however, he followed in the pious footsteps of his elder brother, Dickerson.

Though Dickerson was serious about his devotions, the Church offered more than spiritual solace. It was the keystone of the white Protestant infrastructure, a place where social and career connections were made. At the Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Dickerson found himself a wife.

Young Edgar tagged along enthusiastically. He sang soprano in the choir, served as altar boy and, at thirteen, was baptized into the Lutheran Church by the minister who had conducted his brother’s wedding. Edgar went to a Passion play, he noted in his *Excelsior* diary, attended Sunday school and went to a meeting of a group called Christian Endeavour. ‘Read a little of the *Gospel of Judas Iscariot*,’ he noted one day. ‘(Great Book).’

The *Judas Gospel*, as one might expect, is a fictional account written from the viewpoint of Christ’s betrayer. The Judas concept lodged forever in Edgar’s mind; years later he would even have FBI researchers check the biblical details for him. The possibility that he himself might be betrayed by real or imaginary traitors – would become an obsession.

Edgar’s childhood dossier on Edgar suggests that he did occasionally have fun like other little boys. He celebrated Groundhog Day, dyed eggs at Easter time and – aged fourteen – ‘gave out Valentines.’ ‘Fooled lots of people,’ he noted with glee on April Fools’ Day. He would also claim, years later and less reliably, that when he played cops and robbers he ‘always wanted to be a robber.’

Edgar was fascinated by the new phenomenon of manned flight, and built model airplanes with a friend. In 1909, when he was fourteen, he saw Orville Wright make a flight from downtown Washington to Alexandria and back, demonstrating that sustained air travel was possible. In his journal that day, Edgar proudly noted that he had been ‘the first outsider to shake Orville’s hand.’

In the fall of 1909, Edgar started at a new school – walking three miles there in the morning, three miles home at night. These were his first real steps toward fame and power. For Edgar did not go to Eastern High, the school his brother and sister had attended. ‘His mother,’ said his niece Dorothy, ‘didn’t consider Eastern good enough for him. So he went to Central.’

Central High School was the breeding ground for a Washington elite, a springboard to success. Its advantages have been compared to those of a top British public school, minus the hideous requirements of class and wealth that form the basis of the English system. Like smart British schools, Central placed great emphasis on sport. While Edgar was a pupil, the school team – which included a future general, a future veterans’ leader and a future president of the Washington Board of Trade – amazed everyone by thrashing the University of Maryland at football, 14–0. Edgar, however, was not

sportsman.

~~‘I always wanted to be an athlete,’ he would recall ruefully, ‘but I only weighed 125 lbs in my first year at High School.’~~ As if to prove that he was plucky for all that, Edgar claimed that a sports injury was responsible for his famous ‘bulldog’ profile. A fly ball, he said, had smashed his nose during a school baseball game. According to Edgar’s niece Margaret Fennell, however, his squashed-looking nose was the legacy of a boil that healed badly.

Edgar held men with fine physiques in awe. At school it was Lawrence ‘Biff’ Jones, who went on to become a famous football coach at West Point. Biff, the grown Edgar would admit, was the boy on whom he lavished his ‘hero-worship.’ ‘We buddied around together all the time, and it always drew a laugh from our friends to see the big powerful Biff accompanied by a youngster half his size.’

Edgar threw himself full tilt into the other Central High activity that mirrored the English public school: the Cadet Corps. Central regularly sent graduates to West Point, including – in Edgar’s generation – Jones and several future generals.

Edgar’s school nickname, one which stuck for years, was ‘Speed.’ A Hoover-approved biography suggested, improbably, that this referred to his dexterity with a football. Elsewhere Edgar would claim it went back to his childhood, when he earned pocket money carrying packages for customers at the local store. He was dubbed Speed, he said, because he ran so fast with the packages.

Neither explanation was true, according to Francis Gray, a surviving classmate tracked down for this book. ‘We called him Speed Hoover because he talked fast. He was so fast, talked fast, thought fast ...’

The extraordinary rapidity of the adult Edgar’s voice would be one of his hallmarks. ‘Machine gun,’ ‘staccato,’ ‘like a teamster’s whip when aroused’ are typical descriptions of the way he talked. ‘He can take two hundred words a minute,’ one court reporter was to protest, ‘but that man must be talking four hundred a minute.’

William Sullivan, an FBI Assistant Director who served Edgar for thirty years and then broke with him, had an unkind explanation. ‘He didn’t want a man to ask him any questions,’ said Sullivan, ‘so he’d keep talking right up until the last and then all of a sudden break off the interview and shake hands with the fellow and send him on his way.’² Sullivan’s complaint was to be echoed by dozens of newspaper reporters. Edgar the FBI Director did not talk with people. He talked at them.

Even as a teenager, Edgar’s mind was closing on the issues that would dominate his times. Seen with hindsight, his performance in the school debating society is revealing. Cuba, then as now a political irritant, was regularly in the news. In the debating society Edgar argued and won the motion that ‘Cuba should be annexed to the United States.’ ‘Neg.,’ for negative, he wrote in his Debate Memorandum Book next to the proposition that capital punishment should be abolished. He reasoned

1. The Bible stands for Capital Punishment.
2. All Christian Nations uphold it.
3. The abolition of it would be deplorable in effect on a country. (Brief made).

Edgar would remain in favor of capital punishment for the rest of his life.

One issue Edgar fought and won in the debating society involved women’s rights – specifically whether women should be given the vote. Edgar was against it – vociferously so.

Not everyone took him as seriously as he took himself. ‘My speech is too long. I must condense it,’ Edgar was heard to say after working late into the night preparing for a debate. ‘You can condense steam, Hoover,’ retorted Jeff Fowler, editor of the school magazine, ‘but not hot air.’

At seventeen, Edgar's glittering scholastic progress continued. His report cards show that he scored 'Excellent' in almost every subject. As he carefully figured out for himself, his average grade was 90 percent or higher. He missed school only four times in four years.

Edgar simply could not bear to come second. Another contemporary, David Stephens, remembered his reaction when, as a Captain in the Cadet Corps, Edgar's company failed to win the drum competition. 'As we marched off the field,' Stephens recalled in a letter to Edgar forty years later, 'I wondered if you were crying because you were mad or were mad because you were crying.'

In March 1913, Captain J. E. Hoover led his company down Pennsylvania Avenue in President Wilson's inaugural parade. Sixteen years of Republican government were coming to an end, and America was entering a period of upheaval. While revolution and war overwhelmed Russia and Europe, labor unrest had become a major issue in the United States. Nearly half the working population was toiling excessive hours in appalling conditions, going home to filthy slums at night. The United States was about to experience a wave of strikes, and a million American socialists would demand the overthrow of capitalism.

Soon company guards would be gunning down workers in Ohio. Members of one union, the Industrial Workers of the World, would be lynched. Others would be jailed. Their right to protest at all was questioned by those who asserted that they, and they alone, were '100 per cent American.'

At Central High, meanwhile, things went on as usual. Eighteen-year-old Edgar and his peers immersed themselves in the rites and celebrations of graduation year. Edgar Hoover, Francis Gray and their fellow cadets, splendid in blue-and-white uniforms, made their way to the Cairo Hotel for the regimental ball.

'We weren't expert dancers,' Gray recalled. 'We all wore our sabers, and they got in the way.' A dance in those days was a rigidly formal affair, and each young man came armed with a dance engagement book. There were spaces to fill out the names of female partners 'engaged' to dance the alternating waltzes and foxtrots, and spaces for the names of chaperones.

Edgar's dance book, which he kept all his life, shows that his parents came along as chaperones. The spaces for female partners, however, remain blank. If Edgar's record is to be believed – and he usually recorded everything meticulously – he did not dance with a single girl.

Francis Gray said Edgar 'wasn't a dater, didn't go with girls.' His relatives noticed it, too. 'Edgar never had any girlfriends,' said his niece Dorothy. 'Never.' Edgar's male friends teased him, claiming he was in love only with the Cadet Corps. 'He was,' said Francis Gray, 'just a fraternity man.'

In his yearbook picture, Edgar looks more fragile than his broad-shouldered friends, his mouth pinched and humorless. The caption beneath his name praises him as 'a gentleman of dauntless courage and stainless honor.' Edgar was class valedictorian.

'There is nothing more pleasing,' Edgar wrote in a final Cadet Corps report, 'than to be associated with a company composed of officers and men who you feel are behind you heart and soul. The saddest moment of the year was when I realized that I must part with a group of fellows who had become part of my life.'

Edgar the debater signed off with thoughts on the virtues of competition. Debate, he reckoned, was like life – 'nothing more or less than the matching of one man's wits against another.' And so, armed with a curiously fixed set of certainties for a youth of eighteen, Edgar set forth into the adult world.

As he did so, a family crisis was developing – a tragedy that must have been devastating to a young man coming of age. Edgar's father began losing his mind.

Edgar never discussed his father at all, not even with his closest friends. Surviving relatives, the

generation that grew up during World War I, have only a blurred memory of Dickerson Hoover. To them he was 'Daddy,' a kindly man with a small moustache who liked to take children to the basement to sample his homemade ginger ale. Often, though, Daddy was not home at all.

Dickerson, Sr., was away a lot because, sometime during the war, doctors sent him to an asylum in Laurel, some eighteen miles from Washington. Quite what was wrong with him was not discussed in front of the grandchildren. One of them, Margaret Fennell, remembered only that he 'had a nervous breakdown.'

Dickerson was fifty-six when Edgar left school. He still worked, as he always had, as a printmaker at the government mapmakers. He earned a living wage, but never enough to dispel the notion that his wife, Annie, had married below her station. He had always played second fiddle to Annie at home. Now, in middle age, Dickerson began to be troubled by depression and irrational fears. Repeated trips to the asylum failed to help, and he went steadily downhill.

In the eight years that remained to him, Edgar's father would become a pitiful figure. His death certificate, in 1921, would say he died of 'melancholia,' with 'inanition' as a contributory cause. Melancholia was the contemporary word for what doctors today call clinical depression. Inanition can be the outcome of extreme depression treated inadequately. The patient loses the will to live, stops eating and dies.

This drawn-out tragedy had a traumatic effect on life at Seward Square. Edgar's elder brother and sister were long gone, in their thirties and married with children. Only Annie and young Edgar remained at home, and they reportedly had little patience with Dickerson, Sr.

'My mother,' said Edgar's niece Dorothy, 'used to say Uncle Edgar wasn't very nice to his father when he was ill. He was ashamed of him. He couldn't tolerate the fact that Granddaddy had mental illness. He never could tolerate anything that was imperfect.'

Dorothy, a retired teacher with wide experience of life's trials, said she thought perhaps 'the whole Hoover clan were a little off in the head.' Her memories suggest the Hoover family's emotional life was seriously fractured. Dickerson, Jr., was distant, and his sister Lillian was 'cold, very cold.' To young Edgar, who used to come to Dorothy's home to play croquet, at first seemed 'quite fun to be around.' Then he changed, becoming a remote figure 'inclined to push us all away.'

'I sometimes have thought,' said Edgar's niece Margaret, 'that he really – I don't know how to put it – had a fear of becoming too personally involved with people.'

Half a century later, FBI Assistant Director William Sullivan would voice the same opinion. Edgar, he thought, 'didn't have affection for one single solitary human being around him ...'

'I didn't have any honor or love for him as an uncle,' said Dorothy Davy. 'Whatever he did for the country, he was no use as a relative.' Other family members confirmed – often nervously, as though Edgar were still alive to rebuke them – that he bothered little with family ties. When his widow's sister was struck down by Parkinson's disease, Edgar did little to help. When she died, his appearance at the funeral was so brief as to be insulting.

The only constant family connection for Edgar, far into the prime of his life, would be his mother, Annie. Once they were free of Edgar's father, the burden they had both resented, they became inseparable. Edgar lived at home with his mother until he was a middle-aged man. Only when she died, in 1938, would he leave the house on Seward Square. And when he did find a home of his own, he would live there alone.

‘If you work for a man, in heaven’s name work for him! If he pays you wages that supply you your bread and butter, work for him – speak well of him, think well of him, stand by him and stand by the institution he represents.’

Elbert Hubbard quotation, displayed on Edgar’s orders in FBI field offices

As Edgar grew to manhood, he closed the dossier on himself that he had kept since childhood. There are no more diaries, and few intimate letters, to help chart his six decades of adult life. In accordance with his wishes, his secretary destroyed his private correspondence – and almost certainly much else besides – after his death.

Enough evidence survives, however, to expose the hidden Edgar. The man who projected himself to the public as a stern moral figure, full of integrity, was a walking myth. It was so carefully crafted that he perhaps came to believe much of it himself, but it was a myth nonetheless.

What Edgar said of his past, especially of events long ago, must always be treated with caution. ‘He was a master con man,’ his aide William Sullivan was to say, ‘one of the greatest con men the country has ever produced, and that takes intelligence of a certain kind, an astuteness, a shrewdness.’

In 1913, the year he turned eighteen, Edgar graduated from high school, and decided to study law.

‘I don’t really know why I chose law,’ Edgar would say for public consumption. ‘You come to a crossroads, and you’ve got to go one way or the other.’ The other road beckoning, he claimed, was the Church. In the months before he left school, he said, he was preoccupied with the idea of becoming a minister.

FBI propaganda solemnly repeated this story, portraying a youth who had struggled to choose between one path of good, the Church, and another, the Law. According to this version, Edgar the FBI Director remained a regular churchgoer, a boss who kept a well-thumbed Bible on his desk, who took his religion very seriously indeed.

Some of this was simply untrue, some of it the truth stretched beyond recognition. Relatives recalled no family talk at all about Edgar being ‘torn’ between religion and law. It was the elder brother, Dickerson, not Edgar, who faced such a dilemma.

Edgar did not fully exploit the ‘call of the Church’ gambit until after the death, in 1944, of the brother who might have contradicted him. In 1990, however, a member of Dickerson Jr.’s family emerged to set the record straight. ‘That thing that keeps coming up about Edgar wanting to be a minister,’ said Dickerson’s daughter-in-law Virginia Hoover, ‘it just isn’t true. In our family, we’ve always known that.’

Was Edgar at all religious? As a child, certainly, he was a zealous leader of Sunday school classes. He went on teaching, quirkily dressed up in his high school cadet uniform, well into his teens.

According to the propaganda, this was the start of a lifetime of regular worship. A Bureau-approved article in 1960 would report that he ‘walks down the aisle of Washington’s National Presbyterian Church each Sunday morning at precisely 9 o’clock.’ It was not true. ‘Mr Hoover,’ the church’s former pastor Dr Edward Elson admitted in an interview, ‘was not regular in his attendance ... was present at mainly seasonal affairs.’

Leo McClairen, a former FBI agent who acted as Edgar’s chauffeur whenever he traveled south

did not remember his boss having gone to church once – in twenty years of Christmas visits to Florida.

Edgar's public piety was a sham – as was his version of his decision to go to law school. 'We have no lawyers in our family,' Edgar said, 'and I don't recall that I knew any. But suddenly I took the turn and knew that's what I wanted to be – an attorney.'

In fact, Edgar had a cousin, another John E. Hoover, who was a lawyer, a clerk to five Supreme Court justices and a longtime Justice Department attorney. The family also boasted another very successful lawyer: Annie Hoover's cousin William Hitz was a senior Justice Department attorney. Hitz was quite close to Edgar, according to yet another lawyer relative, Harold Burton, who was to become a U.S. Supreme Court Justice.

George Washington University Law School, where Edgar enrolled in 1913, did not have the prestige of other local universities. It offered, however, a respectable conservative law program, with solid grounding in the nuts and bolts of the legal system. For Edgar, a key advantage was that the law course consisted of evening classes, leaving time for wage-earning during the day.

The purse strings at home were tight now, with the two elder children burdened with family commitments. Soon, as their father's health declined, they would be even tighter. Edgar was the manager of the house at the age of eighteen, and he needed a job. Annie's cousin William Hitz found him one as a thirty-dollar-a-week junior messenger in the order department of the Library of Congress.

Every day for the next four years, Edgar would walk the few blocks from Seward Square to his day job at the Library. He studied at the law school from five until seven, then went home to study some more. He kept his twenty-six law notebooks, filled with neat script, all his life.

He became a member of Kappa Alpha, a southern fraternity with origins at William and Mary College in Virginia – a link he would maintain long after his student days were over. GWU graduates and especially Kappa Alpha men, were to be among his closest associates at the FBI.

A photograph from those days shows Edgar at the center of a group of students, hands thrust deep in pockets, a flower in his buttonhole, a grave expression on his face. 'He was slim, dark and intense,' a classmate recalled. 'He sat off by himself against the wall, and always had the answers. None of us got to know him very well.'

As manager of his fraternity house, Edgar proved to be a budding despot. He reportedly 'took a dim and moral view of such chapter-house capers as crap games, poker and drinking bouts.' He 'located our contraband,' recalled Dave Stephens, who had also been at Central with Edgar, 'and destroyed it by sending it crashing to the concrete areaway.' 'Speed chastised us with his morality,' recalled actor William Gaxton.

While the nickname Speed stuck, some students hit on a crueller one. 'We men who received C's,' said GWU alumnus C. W. Collier, 'called Hoover, who received A's, "Fatty-pants."'

Edgar had no time for the slew of writers and thinkers then changing social and political attitudes around the world. Not for him the ideas of Freud and George Bernard Shaw, Karl Marx and John Reed, Pankhurst or Bertrand Russell. His favorite poets, he let it be known, were Edgar Guest and Vaslav Young and Robert Service, the he-man poet who told America that:

... only the Strong shall thrive;
That surely the weak shall perish, and only
the fit survive.

Edgar received his Bachelor of Law degree, without honors, in the summer of 1916. America meanwhile, was moving closer to entering the war in Europe. There were problems at home

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