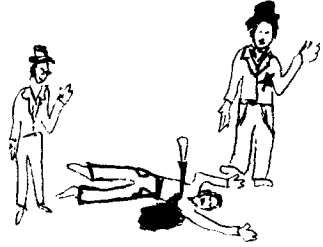


J. EDGAR HOOVER AND THE DETECTIVE HERO

By Richard Gid Powers



There might be few political scientists who would be willing to go as far as Jacques Ellul in asserting that the mass media have assumed the traditional function of the leader in the mass society, but many have begun to suspect that mass politics and mass entertainments are governed by the same general laws. The result has been the development of a dramaturgical theory of politics in which Walter Bagehot's despised "dignified" part of government has assumed an ever more central place. "All the world's a stage," is more than a metaphor in contemporary political science and communications theory: it is an essential insight into the way power operates in the mass society, whether this is as you like it or not.

While political scientists have begun studying the importance of politics' dramatic aspect, other theorists have been working on a theoretical understanding of popular entertainment's impact on political attitudes. The Frankfurt school and the French semiologists have in their different ways outlined the part mass entertainment plays in constructing the symbolic reality within which mass politics operates.

This paper is an introduction to a study of one of popular politics' most successful practitioners, J. Edgar Hoover. It is not intended to pass for an adequate inquiry into the meaning of his role in American culture, but rather as an indication of the approaches that might be taken and the materials that might be examined in the course of a more elaborate study. It ought to be subtitled "An introduction to a case study in popular politics."

J. Edgar Hoover was a phenomenon without parallel in American cultural history. Hoover's career was played out in the full glare of publicity: it would be superfluous to serve up illustrations of the political power he acquired as head of the F.B.I. from 1924 until his death in 1972. Few American politicians have ever held the popular imagination in as firm a grip as did

Hoover, and none ever maintained their grasp so long. The sources of Hoover's control over rival political figures are just now being fully revealed, but those dossiers on hijinks in high places would have been blank charges had Hoover not been so secure in the public's esteem that he could denounce without fear of being splattered. It was Hoover's role as a public hero, a celebrity of the headlines, "Public Hero Number One" as one pulp called him in the thirties, that was the ultimate source of his power.

A public hero is no test-tube baby. He is the result of an almost sexual dialectic between a public whose needs, both practical and expressive, define the contours of the heroic role, and a public figure whose actions demonstrate his ability to fill that role. Therefore a figure like Hoover cannot be studied apart from the culture that nourished and rewarded him. Moreover, if we can learn why Hoover became a public hero and why there should have been available for him a heroic role as national symbol of law enforcement, we will at the same time be looking at the structure and political processes of the mass society and the role of such people as Hoover in defining and maintaining that system.

Hoover did not become famous until August 1933, when his name, picture, deeds and writing began suddenly to appear everywhere one looked in the mass media. He had, however, been head of what would ultimately be called the F.B.I. since 1924, and had been performing important functions within that agency ever since joining it in 1917. In comparison with his later fame, however, he had been performing his labors in an obscurity as deep as Grant's at Galena. In July 1933 he was unknown. A year later he was one of the most famous men in America. What had happened? What food of the gods did he consume?

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was founded in a blaze of publicity in July 1908. President Roosevelt was in a deadlock with Congress, as he had been throughout his elected term. His congressional relations consisted of mutual threats and recriminations, with both parties frequently expressing their disdain for each other before a public audience that thoroughly enjoyed the performance. In an effort to seize the initiative from Congress and to preserve his popular support as a dynamic leader in the face of his legislative ineffectiveness, Roosevelt began an investigation of the corrupt involvement of important congressmen in an Idaho land fraud scheme. This was a scandal which happily involved several of Roosevelt's Republican enemies in the far West and also included his most hated rival, Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina.

Because the Justice Department had no investigators of its own, Roosevelt and Attorney General Bonaparte had borrowed agents from the Secret Service of the Treasury Department. The obvious investigator, the General Land Office of the Interior Department, was thoroughly implicated in the scandal. The guilty congressmen, of course, were terrified at the prospect of this investigation, and the innocent were also very far from applauding, because with a President after congressional scalps raking over one's past assisted by an army of detectives, no one could be sure he would emerge unscathed. Their fear was especially acute because the President was turning over anything he uncovered to the press. Since Congress regarded Roosevelt's investigation of the Idaho land frauds as an attempt to discredit and intimidate it, the legislature defended itself by passing a law

before adjournment for the summer of 1908 which ordered the Justice Department not to "borrow" detectives from other agencies.¹

This was the opening Roosevelt needed. Branding Congress's action a *de facto* interference with a criminal investigation and flourishing his constitutional obligation to enforce the laws despite the efforts of crooked congressmen to impede him, he had Attorney General Bonaparte create the "Bureau of Investigation" within the Justice Department. Congress responded with wrath that called upon the Magna Carta, the Declaration and the Constitution to witness the heinousness of Roosevelt's assault on civil liberties. Unfortunately for the impact of their rhetoric, several of those who most stridently defended the right of Americans to go uninvestigated were soon behind bars because of this very investigation.²

The Bureau of Investigation was therefore the accidental outcome of a specific political controversy. It was founded to provide quick political profit for one particular president, profit which he could record in two ledgers. The first ledger was the private one: here Roosevelt collected facts about congressmen and other officials which they would rather not see the light of day. This aspect of the Bureau's work might be termed "elite discipline." The second ledger was public: here Roosevelt scored points with his supporters by posing as their champion in a crusade against the lawless both inside and outside of the government. This can be called "symbolic politics." In all of its subsequent operations the Bureau continued to work on these two levels, acting privately to preserve discipline among the elite leadership of the nation, and acting publicly to impress the masses with the government's importance as the nation's protector against the enemies of the people.

Why had it taken until 1908 for the branch of the federal government charged with enforcing the law to create its own investigative force? The answer is that not until Roosevelt's time was there a need for a national police: there was no "national crime" for a national police to police.

What is "national crime?" It is crime that for some reason has come to concern the entire nation rather than simply some locality, class or group within the nation. Throughout the nineteenth century there had been almost no such crime: New York, the West, industry, or immigrants might have a crime problem, but the nation did not. Crime could not become national news because until the 1890s there was, except for national politics, no national news.

Crime had been a staple of American journalism since 1830 when Benjamin Day's New York *Sun* discovered what crime news could do for circulation. At that time, however, local readers were interested in *local* crime. When outrages like bombings or assassinations attracted more than local attention they were still seen as challenges to *local* order. They were the responsibility of local officials who might, however, become national heroes (Roosevelt himself as New York City Police Commissioner) or villains (Altgeld of Illinois) depending on how they handled their responsibilities. There was no shortage of crimes, but no national crime until two conditions were met: an interlocking network of news media that alerted the nation to local offenses, and an editorial policy that featured crime news and so depended on a constant supply of crimes (which the

local market could not supply). By the mid-1890s both situations existed because of the press wars of Pulitzer and Hearst. A regular diet of crime news gathered from police blotters everywhere and shared by papers all over the country was creating the impression in the local reader that crime was everywhere and that, no matter how far away, it concerned *him*. Editors were then faced with the problem of making distant crime seem significant to the local reader; they found they could do this by treating crimes as facts not significant in themselves but significant as evidence proving the existence of a much more important situation, a crime problem. A crime problem thus came into existence once an audience had to be interested in crimes that concerned it only indirectly. In more recent years a "wonderful world of sports" became a reality when the local demand for sports news outran the local supply so that the audience had to be interested in new sources of sports entertainment imported from strange places and played by strange peoples. In both cases it was difficult to persuade the audience that it was directly involved in the particular crime or game under discussion. However it was possible to persuade the audience that as alert citizens or fans they ought to be concerned about "crime" or "sports." Therefore a rape in Arkansas could be presented as worth a Newark reader's attention because the outrage in the Ozarks was part of the "crime problem." Because of the new nationally integrated news media and their reliance on crime news the federal government by 1900 found itself with a national crime problem. Moreover it faced the question of why it was doing nothing about it.

Although there was no national crime problem before 1900, the federal government did face some similar challenges, challenges that were as abstract as the crime problem and which presented the government with a similar difficulty in formulating a response. In the nineteenth century there were three such cases, all three having to do with the emerging economic organization of American society. The first was the Jacksonian problem of the Bank; the second was the question of slavery; the third was the Gilded Age rise of the trusts. With the first and the last the government was able to deal successfully. The problem of slavery was one that evaded political solution.

In all three of these cases the American public was faced with a developing economic order that was creating real dislocations as well as a cultural sense of disorder and ineffectiveness. What Jackson was able to do with his veto of the Bank recharter in 1832 and Congress with its passage of the Sherman Anti-trust Act of 1890 was to fix the blame for the dislocations and cultural disorder on symbolic threats, the Bank and the trusts. The government was then able to perform acts or pass laws that convinced the public that the threats were under control. In both of these cases, of course, the symbolic reassurance provided by taming the banks and the trusts permitted the economic organization and development of the country to proceed without the interference of public opinion. The Great Compromise of 1820 had once been a symbolic solution for the question of slavery, but once Webster "nationalized" the problem of slavery in 1850 (in the opinion of the North) no further symbolic solutions could be found.

If one believes that the Bank Veto and the Anti-trust Act had no effect on the economic structure of the country this kind of symbolic politics can seem

negligible or contemptible. Nevertheless such acts of symbolic reassurance appear to be necessary if a government wishes to preserve its authority. A government maintains its hold on the public's loyalty by proving itself able to protect its citizens against threats. When a people feels threatened it does a government no good to plead that the threat is imaginary, that the Bank or the trusts are only symbols of a process that is causing distress, a process with which the government is unable to deal. To a symbolic threat there must be an appropriate symbolic response, and if one leader is too fastidious for this kind of witchcraft another will readily be found.³

During the twentieth century national leaders found themselves constantly confronted with the sort of symbolic challenges that earlier had emerged only once in a generation. All kinds of problems that were essentially local in character and that could be dealt with effectively only on the local level were now collected, categorized and nationalized by the new national media of communications. National leaders found themselves having to learn how to deal with these new national problems even though the problems consisted of vast arrays of localized events which just a few years before had been universally considered to be exclusively local in character. Once a new "national" public was created by mass communications (replacing the old "federal" public) the national government found itself compelled to take a stand on every issue that came to concern the public, whether or not programs on the national level could have any effect on the problem.

Theodore Roosevelt was the first president to be faced with the new public of mass communications, and his by-now-clichéd description of the presidency as a "bully pulpit" was phrased in his own idiom, but it was no more than a fair description of the new role every president since him has had to play, making allowances for variations in personal style. Roosevelt had an opinion on everything, from coinage design and football to socialism and religion, and he needed no prodding to make his opinions known. Other presidents *have* needed prodding, but in all cases presidents have had to take stands on every issue of public concern, whether or not the president has any power to effect a solution. In fact the public seeks to fill the presidency with men whose reflexive tendency is to take stands. One student of this phenomenon has observed that "the public official who dramatizes his competence is eagerly accepted on his own terms. . . . Willingness to cope is evidently central. Any action substitutes personal responsibility for impersonal causal chains and chance. The assumption of responsibility becomes vital in a world that is impossible to understand or control."⁴

If high officials neglect ritual statements of concern in times of public alarm the result is widespread anxiety, or more precisely, anomie. It is one of the most important functions of the central authority (the president or his spokesman) to reaffirm popular conventions whenever they come under attack, particularly when the threat is symbolic. To neglect this duty is to risk the accusation of encouraging or approving the symbolic evil. Roosevelt's understanding of this principle can be seen in an incident that occurred in 1906 when newspaper readers were being diverted and scandalized by reports of free love and trial marriages being advocated by advanced thinkers and "new" women. Roosevelt's response was to ask Congress

for a Constitutional amendment that would have extended federal authority to "the whole question of marriage and divorce" to safeguard "home ties" and oppose birth control.⁵

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was a byproduct of Roosevelt's need to have some way to pose as a symbol of law and order. It grew because the Bureau offered a convenient means for public officials who succeeded Roosevelt to strike similar poses and to express symbolic concern when new issues emerged to disturb the tranquility of the public imagination. The Bureau's function was to promote mass quiescence by fighting crime in whatever symbolic form the popular mind might imagine it.

This thesis gathers support from the events in 1910 that produced the first major enlargement of the Bureau's authority. For two years after the conclusion of the Idaho land fraud case in 1908 the Bureau was left with no duties except the investigation of crimes on Indian reservations. During these same years, however, a bizarre hysteria over white slavery began to develop which finally forced the government to make a symbolic response. No doubt there were prostitutes in the United States in 1910 and some senators probably knew where to find them. There certainly was also organized prostitution, and once again some congressmen must have had first-hand knowledge of vice rings. But the newspapers had convinced the overheated public mind that the whores and their pimps were very nearly in control of the nation; the town prostitute was only the visible manifestation of a gigantic conspiracy, a secret network that worked its will over almost every aspect of American life. Stanley W. Finch, the head of the Bureau of Investigation at the time, told the congressmen that the Mann Act was needed because "unless a girl was actually confined in a room and guarded there was no girl, regardless of her station in life, who was altogether safe. There was need that every person be on his guard, because no one could tell when his daughter or his wife or his mother would be selected as a victim."⁶ It did no good for authorities to point out that the white slavery conspiracy, at least in the magnitude suggested by Finch, was imaginary. To say this was to seem to make light of the real fears that traditional sexual morality and the sanctity of the home were under attack. The Mann Act of 1910 was the government's testimony that it shared the public's concern about morals, a concern that it expressed by symbolically opposing the symbolic expression of the public's fears. Years later Hoover himself would describe the intent of the Mann Act so as to lend support to this analysis. He said that it was an attack on "the problem of vice in modern civilization."⁷

Thus the Mann Act episode seems to follow the same pattern established in the previous examples of the Bank, the trusts, and the Idaho Land Fraud. An incoherent public anxiety finally comes to a focus in the form of some Menace that is the personification of the fear. The government then performs an action that indicates its potency in dealing with the personification of the fear, thus avoiding having to grapple with the source of the problem, because it is frankly not in the power of the government to do anything about it. When King Canute began giving order to the waves his popularity probably soared. His subjects must have loved him because while his commands might not have any effect on the sea they at least showed that the king cared and was *trying* to do something.

The Bureau was given the responsibility of demonstrating the earnestness of the government's enforcement of the Mann Act, which it did by selecting for arrest individuals who would generate the maximum publicity. The prize victim was Jack Johnson, the unpopular Negro boxing champion.⁸ The Bureau never forgot the lesson it learned during its Mann Act days: he who defends popular morality will come to be defended *by* popular morality. In fact he *becomes* popular morality in the minds of those who cannot distinguish between a thing and its representation. Not one to let a good trick die, as late as 1947 Hoover was writing magazine articles with titles like "How Safe is Your Daughter?"⁹

Besides the Mann Act, the Bureau's most important jobs before its flush times in the thirties were the Slacker raids of April-September 1918 and the Red Scare raids of the winter of 1919-1920. To the threats posed by the Draft Dodger and the Red the Bureau responded with dragnets. In the first case it rounded up all men of draft age in several cities and held them until they could produce their draft registration; in the second it arrested all members of the predominantly foreign-born Communist Party with the intention of deporting them aboard "Soviet Arks." In both instances the publicity was feverish. There seem to be no national figures on arrests in the Slacker raids, but in New York City there were over 75,000 arrested, while the Bureau itself admitted that only one out of every two hundred was actually a slacker. In the Red Scare raids 10,000 were arrested but only 3,500 were prosecuted and only 700 deported.¹⁰ The Bureau's handling of the Red Scare raids was J. Edgar Hoover's first important assignment. Hoover had become the Bureau's resident authority on radicalism and communism and had been the responsible author of the first official Bureau position paper on communism. He had been the head of the anti-radical General Intelligence Division of the Bureau since its inception in 1919. Hoover's first professional experience was defusing a symbolic threat through symbolic action. He learned early in his career the need for carefully managing the news media if symbolic action was to succeed in reassuring its audience.

There is little need to analyze the sorry details of the Slacker and Red Scare raids. That has been done often and done well. The point is that the Bureau's work against the slackers and the Reds was of one piece with its war against vice in 1910, and that all of these actions prefigured the Bureau's work against the gangsters of the thirties. Each time the Bureau was the effective means whereby the law could be mobilized in a pageant of popular politics: through highly publicized dragnets the Bureau sought to demonstrate the government's opposition to unpopular behavior or opinions: "Vice," "Disloyalty," "Anarchy." Depending on whether attention is focused on the victim or the audience this kind of activity discourages nonconformity or encourages conformity and thus strengthens "organic" social solidarity.

When the law is used as an instrument of ideological repression it is in the nature of things that *those charged are always innocent*. What is being attacked by the law is an idea or a form of behavior, and individuals are accused not for their actions but because they have become symbols of proscribed ideas or behavior. But people have little control over whether or not they become symbols, nor can they fully determine what they come to *mean* to others. Their symbolic signifi-

cance is controlled by the audience and its manipulators (politicians, journalists and policemen). Therefore the victims are not responsible for what has put them in jail or brought them to trial—that they have become symbols of dangerous cultural tendencies. If they have committed criminal acts, such acts function merely as illustrations of the evil they symbolically represent. From the earliest days, the victims of the Bureau have been prosecuted not for what they have done, but for what they have meant.

From 1908 until 1924 when Hoover assumed command the Bureau was the highly visible expression of the government's opposition to sexual offenders, the unpatriotic, anarchists, communists and radicals (especially the I.W.W.). Why, then, did the Bureau lapse into a nine-year period of obscurity during the first phase of Hoover's directorship?

From the beginning the Bureau had its critics. Since almost invariably the *symbolically* guilty victims of the Bureau turned out to be *legally* innocent, the criticism had plenty of fuel to feed on. Indignation over the Bureau's misdeeds, however, would never have been enough to bring the Bureau down. The F.B.I. could (and did) defend itself by charging that defenders of its victims were really motivated by sympathy for the unpopular causes the victims represented. This argument often had a certain degree of validity and in any case was effective rhetorically.

What almost destroyed the Bureau was not its performance of ideological repression. Its other role was to silence the elite critics of government policy by amassing damaging information against them. It was in this role that the Bureau finally overreached itself. Harding's Secretary of the Interior and Attorney General used the Bureau to head off exposure of the scandals at Teapot Dome by trying to frame their most dangerous critic, Senator Burton Wheeler of Montana. When this came out at Wheeler's trial the history of the Bureau's activities against Congress was revealed. Totally disgraced, the Bureau lost its entire top leadership, and the new director was given the job of rehabilitating the Bureau by keeping it ostentatiously free of politics (both real and symbolic). The man who was given this housecleaning task was J. Edgar Hoover, and by all accounts he *did* concentrate until 1933 on keeping things clean. During these years he sought to identify the Bureau with science which was a powerfully anti-political symbol during the twenties, stressing new developments like fingerprinting and crime laboratories. But in 1933 a new set of conditions forced the government to bring the Bureau out of mothballs: a government desperate to reassert its authority and its effectiveness, and a new crime wave made up of front-page gangsterism.

The F.B.I.'s own historian, Don Whitehead, explains the sudden rise of the Bureau to prominence during the early thirties as a response to an abrupt change in public attitudes:

A kidnap-murder in New Jersey, a gang massacre in Missouri and a kidnaping in Oklahoma were the crimes of 1932-1933 which shocked the nation and, by their chain reaction, sent the F.B.I. into a strange kind of guerilla warfare against the armed forces of the underworld.

During the twenties most of the country had watched the growth of crime with a so-what attitude. Those fellows in the gangs, many people felt, were no worse than the thieves in

dinner jackets who had been corrupting federal, state and local governments; about the only difference was that one group used guns and the other didn't. But this tolerance gave way to angry demands that something be done about the menace of the gangsters and racketeers. And the beginning of the change in attitude can be pinpointed as to time and place.¹¹

H. L. Mencken called the Lindbergh case the greatest newspaper story since the crucifixion, and in terms of sheer volume of newsprint he was probably right. When the Lindbergh baby was taken from the family's house in New Jersey on March 1, 1932, the event touched off such a wild craze of public interest that it seemed as though the business of the entire country had come to a stop while the nation participated in the manhunt through the pages of their newspapers. Three months later the Congress passed the Lindbergh Kidnap Law, which, as usual, responded to a crime wave by throwing the F.B.I. at it. On September 14, 1934, after publicity which had turned everyone involved into a celebrity, the case was broken, and two years later the kidnapper was executed. The principal hero of the case, Colonel Schwartzkopf of the New Jersey State Police, went on to star as the announcer for Phillips H. Lord's "Gangbusters" (*né* "G-Men") radio show.

The second incident that helped create the image of a new national crime problem was the "Kansas City Massacre" of June 17, 1933. This was a daring attempt to free a Missouri mobster from custody, a bloodbath in which three F.B.I. agents died. The "star" of this atrocity was "Pretty Boy" Floyd.

The third media event that precipitated the Bureau's reentry into the public arena was the kidnapping of an Oklahoma City oilman on July 23, 1933. The villain this time was "Machine Gun" Kelly, and according to the legend fostered by the Bureau it was Kelly who, during his arrest for this crime, gave the agents their "G-Men" nickname.

The public was fascinated by these crimes and, as a good Aristotelian audience, it demanded a cathartic response from the national government. The demand most frequently heard was that all local police be nationalized into a great national police force. The Roosevelt administration was at this time enjoying a great public relations success with its mobilization of American business in the N.R.A., and so such a solution must have seemed an appealing one to the New Dealers. Hoover, however, immediately saw that it would be dangerous to allow the government to shoulder the responsibility for dealing with crime. It would be difficult to prevent the public from fixing the government with this responsibility if there was actually a national police force. Writing at the time Hoover observed that "The cry of the public is for Federal legislation and Federal prosecution of racketeers. It is perhaps not overlooked, but it is certainly underemphasized, that the problem is a state one."¹² Hoover was able to make his superiors see the validity of his position and so when it came time for Homer Cummings, Roosevelt's Attorney General, to make his recommendations to congress on the federal response to crime he said

it is distinctly not the duty of the Federal Government generally to preserve peace and order in the various communities of our nation . . . we need expansion of the federal penal statutes to include control over the unlawful activities of those who deliberately take advantage of the protection presently offered them by state lines in perpetrating their crimes.¹³

Congress was persuaded by Cummings' reasoning, and during the spring of 1934 it passed new crime laws that made it a federal offense to rob a federal bank, to cross state lines to avoid prosecution and to use interstate communications systems for extortion. These new laws also made *all* interstate kidnappings federal crimes and gave F.B.I. agents the right to make arrests and tote guns. These laws *seemed* to be drastic ones; writing in 1937 one observer thought that "in the brief span between 1932 and 1934 police work in this country underwent the most radical change in its history . . . these measures were revolutionary. They put the federal government, for the first time, into the business of punishing crimes of violence."¹⁴ The truth about the New Deal response to the crime problem, however, was that it was both more and less than it seemed. In effect the federal government was putting itself in the position of being able to deal with the *crime problem* (that is, with the popular image of crime) while resisting being saddled with the responsibility for preventing *crimes*. This paradox is the key to Hoover's resistance to the national police force idea, a position from which he never deviated and which he reaffirmed consistently throughout his career. Hoover's unwillingness to have the F.B.I. perceived as a national police force with real crime prevention responsibilities later plunged him into difficulties first with the Kennedy brothers, who wanted federal "strike forces" against crime, and then with Nixon, who wanted his help with the "plumbers."

Hoover refused to allow the F.B.I. to be called a national police force and resisted the nationalization of local police under F.B.I. leadership because this would symbolize the federal government's acceptance of responsibility for the prevention of crime throughout the country. This would have been disastrous because within the limits imposed upon action by Hoover's free society ideology, nothing the federal government could do would have any real effect on the occurrence of crime throughout the nation. Hoover had only to review the disastrous history of the Prohibition Bureau to see what would happen to any federal agency given responsibility for controlling crime: the ineffectiveness of the government's anti-crime work would soon become apparent and the Bureau and its head would inevitably be blamed. Hoover understood quite well what real crime prevention meant, because in 1931 the Wickersham Commission had argued that a real effort to deal with crimes throughout the nation would entail a sociological and psychological rather than a moralistic approach. Hoover's own religious outlook made the sociological approach to crime abhorrent to him, but even if he had been persuaded of the approach's merits, he would have been justified in doubting whether American society would ever implement a program that called for some redistribution of wealth and an alteration of cultural attitudes and values. Hoover was undoubtedly correct in suspecting that *any* measures adopted by the federal government to lower the incidence of crime would be ineffective, and that such a demonstration of the federal government's ineffectiveness in such an important and sensational area as crime would have a thoroughly disillusioning effect on the public's confidence in the government. No—the federal government must resist at all costs the actual responsibility for preventing crimes; local governments must be made to seem responsible for their occurrence, while the federal government would undertake to deal with crime in the one form that it could not

avoid: the symbolic image of the crime problem, a matter of public relations. To accomplish this Hoover adopted a three-part strategy.

First, he acquired complete control over the raw material of the public's perception of crime, crime statistics. The F.B.I.'s Uniform Crime Reports have been criticized on almost every possible methodological ground (although they have been recently given impressive and unexpected support as an accurate index to *variations* in the crime rate), but such criticisms are really beside the point. These figures allow the Bureau to be the *first* to interpret the meaning of the numbers in relative and absolute terms. The Bureau is the first to know what is happening to crime across the nation, and thus it is the first to say what the figures mean and who is to blame. Critics of the Bureau must then begin their side of the argument with a rebuttal, a rhetorically inferior position. This control over crime statistics the F.B.I. has maintained until the present.

The second aspect of Hoover's strategy was to keep the federal government's responsibility from extending to *crimes* (which he would force local governments to cope with; their failure would be heralded by gibes from Hoover); he would limit the Bureau's jurisdiction to the crime *problem*. It was not difficult to see theoretically how this might be done, but to accomplish it took the knowledge of a master and the skill of an artist. Hoover's management of the crime problem depended on his insight into the fact that the public is not stirred by the large number of anonymous crimes that constantly occur. These attract only passing attention. The public is stirred by the individual, highly dramatic offense that seems meaningful because it seems to be a *symbol* of all crimes. By carefully overseeing the drafting of federal crime legislation Hoover restricted his responsibility to those few crimes that happen to be transformed by publicity into crime symbols. During the thirties these were kidnappings and bank robberies, during the forties and fifties spying and sabotage. Hoover well understood that, as George Orwell observed, "The average man is not directly interested in politics, and when he reads he wants the current struggles of the world to be transformed into a simple story about individuals."¹⁵ Hoover made sure that he had to deal only with those crimes that were "simple stories about individuals," because these were the only crimes that mounted a direct challenge to the government's image of effectiveness. Hoover's method was to transform crime from a faceless and unmanageable chaos born out of thousands of obscure crimes into the sensational deeds of a few dramatic public enemies *who could be dealt with according to a set of popular conventions featuring detection, chase, shoot-out and capture or death*. Of course a rational manager of public opinion will not long rely on the vagaries of the popular press to provide him with his supply of symbolic criminals. Therefore Hoover hit upon the device of creating his own symbols by designating selected outlaws as "Public Enemies"; in the fifties this process was further rationalized by creating a never-ending supply of symbols by means of the "Ten Most Wanted Fugitives" list.

Once Hoover had perfected his management of symbolic crime, "real" crime could grow and fester, but the government would be off the hook. Crimes could be enumerated and evaluated by the F.B.I. and blamed on unpopular groups against which the government could align itself with the public. Since crime was

now symbolic, its causes must also be symbolic: ideas and practices offensive to conventional morality, all lumped together under the generic label of "disrespect for the law." Blame for the increase in crime could be charged against symbols of the scientific approach: criminologists, penologists, parole officers, lawyers and politicians; but perhaps one of Hoover's own lists should be cited: "Theorists, pseudo-criminologists, hypersentimentalists, criminal coddlers, convict lovers, and fiddle-faced reformers." These were Hoover's enemies because their non-symbolic (or even naturalistic) attitude toward crime threatened the theatrical suspension of disbelief that let the public accept the front-page capture of a notorious gangster as an effective government response to the crime problem.

The third aspect of the Hoover strategy was the most important. Jack Alexander wrote in 1937 that the Kansas City Massacre convinced Hoover that "the mere quieting down of the kidnapping and bankrobbery scare was not enough but that an actual crusade was needed. . . . Someone had to become the symbol of the crusade, and the Director decided that, because of his position, it was plainly up to him."¹⁶ Hoover was not a humble man, but more than vanity was involved when Hoover decided to turn himself into a national symbol of the law. This may in fact have been the only effective way of dealing with the symbol of national crime, because if Hoover could become a symbol of national law enforcement, then the effectiveness of the government's war on crime would come to depend not on what Hoover *did*, but upon what he *meant* in the public's imagination. According to Drew Pearson Hoover was able to accomplish this transformation of himself into a symbol through the efforts of a newspaperman named Harry Suydam, a publicist Homer Cummings hired for Hoover on Pearson's recommendation. Pearson recalled that Suydam "performed so spectacularly that within a year he had transformed Hoover, previously a barely known bureaucrat, into an omnipotent crime-buster whose name was familiar to every American."¹⁷

However Louis B. Nichols, Hoover's third in command, recalls that Suydam worked for the Attorney-General and not for Hoover, and that Suydam's job was to build up the Justice Department at the Bureau's expense. Nichols argues that Rex Collier, a reporter for the *Washington Star*, wrote the first features about the Bureau, and therefore Nichols gives Collier credit for creating the public interest in the Bureau that later publicists exploited.

Before 1933 Hoover had written only one article that was circulated outside the Bureau, and that was a scientific essay on fingerprinting for the *Annals of the American Academy*. Beginning in August 1933 Hoover's by-line began to appear regularly in the mass circulation magazines (particularly *American Magazine*) and for the rest of the decade the rate of Hoover's writing approached one article a month. Usually credit was given to the "editorial assistance" of Courtney R. Cooper. His symbolic approach to crime thus became familiar to the readers of such magazines as *Parade*, *Reader's Digest*, *Scholastic*, and the already mentioned *American Magazine*.

During the 1930's the equivalents to the television talk shows for introducing new names to the public were the gossip columns, particularly those of Ed Sullivan and Walter Winchell. Hoover assiduously cultivated these writers,

trading exclusive news for mention in their columns. This meant that his diet, hobbies and sports were all described in the daily papers. From these publicists Hoover learned how to pick up publicity by drinking at the Stork Club and vacationing at Palm Beach.

As a part of this process Hoover's appearance began to change. Hoover's photos before 1933 show a thin, pale, serious person with a camera-shy, inexpressive face and slicked down hair. He posed for these early shots working at his desk with pen in hand. After the build-up Hoover was characteristically photographed in action poses: with a machine gun, tennis racket, or fishing rod, or striding beside his heroic subordinate, Melvin Purvis. By 1944 the Bureau would be circulating an 8 x 10 publicity portrait by Karsh of Ottawa in which a relaxed, confident Hoover is dressed in a movie hero's three-piece suit. He knows how to dominate the camera and looks like a man sure of his celebrity status and in complete control of his image. The caption for the 1944 portrait has the kind of prose that a theatrical agent writes for his client:

Tough and looks it, is MR. J. EDGAR HOOVER, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation of America, the most efficient anti-crime organization in the world. This stockily built chief has a sensational record for bringing public enemies of all kinds, including the notorious kidnaping gangs, to justice. The prevention of sabotage and espionage have since the war become major tasks of the F.B.I., and as a result of the exploits of his men, Mr. Hoover is the hero of all American schoolboys. . . . Besides many articles in newspapers and magazines, he has written a book, "Persons in Hiding." Mr. Hoover has a pleasant personality; is a bachelor; fond of sports; and collects Chinese antiques.

This publicity treatment during the mid-thirties quickly turned Hoover into, as producer Quinn Martin of "The Untouchables" and "The F.B.I." has said, "a star in his own right." Martin said that when he met Hoover in the fifties "I felt much as I did when I met Cary Grant—that this was a special person."¹⁸ Publicity alone, however, could have done no more than make Hoover a very famous person and his Bureau a very notable force. Clearly something more than this happened to Hoover; he became more than a celebrity; he became "Public Hero Number One." During the thirties Hoover became more than just a famous person who fascinated the public because of what he did. He became vitally important to the American people because of what he *meant*, and his agency and its chief acquired a symbolic role in the culture.

What was Hoover's secret for turning public relations dross into mythic gold? The governmental woods in the thirties were full of ambitious men eagerly seeking the greatness of heroism. Why did Hoover succeed where so many others had failed?

It is no answer to say that these were hero-worshipping times, although they were. F.D.R.'s success in making himself into a tribal leader, a cultural symbol of solidarity more than a president, perhaps indicates that during the depression years the nation needed heroes who could counteract cultural disintegration. In fact, during this decade it was not unusual for the symbolic roles of Roosevelt and Hoover to be linked together. Jules Feiffer remembers that as far as comic book readers were concerned, Roosevelt and Hoover were the eternal president and vice-president.¹⁹

Others before Hoover had sold themselves to the public as symbols of the "war on crime." Ole Hanson, Calvin Coolidge, and A. Mitchell Palmer were public officials who tried it, as did Allan Pinkerton among the free entrepreneurs. Where Hoover's method was different was that they had offered themselves to the public as heroes on the basis of their deeds, and so had to maintain their image by repeating their exploits until they finally ran out of new villains to vanquish; Hoover presented himself as the embodiment of a role and claimed to be a hero because of the role he filled and not because of the things he did. Once he had succeeded in identifying himself with this role he had merely to remind his public occasionally of it—the role would take care of the rest.

This may all sound mysterious. What was this prepotent role that did so much for Hoover and made him a political immortal in *saedula saeculorum*? What Hoover did was to adopt the guise of the detective hero, a pop culture figure who had a long and firmly established symbolic meaning in American iconography. Hoover managed to persuade the public that the F.B.I. agent was a real life version of the fictional detective hero that Americans idolized in their magazines, comic strips and radio shows. Therefore as the head of these amazing G-Men, Hoover must be the greatest of them all, the archetypal detective.

More specifically, the detective hero upon whom Hoover modeled himself was the *action* detective of the story paper, dime novel and pulp magazine. Hoover adopted two approaches in working towards his goal of identifying his agents with the action detectives. First he highlighted the similarities between G-Man adventures and the exploits of Hawkshaw the Detective, Old Sleuth, Old Cap Collier, Nick Carter and Dick Tracy. Hoover's second means of mythologizing the F.B.I. (and by "Hoover" after 1933 is meant that corporate personality consisting of Hoover himself and the writers of the Crime Records Division) is even more interesting to the student of popular culture. Beginning in 1933 Hoover encouraged writers to use G-Men and Hoover himself as characters in the fictional detective stories appearing in pulp magazines, comics, movies and radio shows.

America's fascination with the fictional detective hero was almost a hundred years old when Hoover decided that such popularity was too valuable to waste on mere entertainment. Howard Haycraft's famous dictum that there could have been no detective stories until there were actually detectives is undoubtedly true. The first popular accounts of detectives began to appear shortly after the formation of the first professional detective agencies: around 1827 in England (the memoirs of the Bow Street Runners) and around 1829 in France (the memoirs of Vidocq). These early detective stories were eagerly read in this country where Edgar Allan Poe created the first detective short story in 1841, "The Adventures in the Rue Morgue." This story appeared in "Uncle Sam," the first American story paper, a medium of entertainment that would prosper largely because of the steady diet of detective stories it could supply.

The attention of the standard histories of the detective story has been focused on what Poe called the story of ratiocination, or what has come to be known as the mystery. This is an artfully constructed tale in which a supremely intelligent hero guides the reader through a maze of clues in pursuit of a barely

characterized murderer. In the mystery story the characterization of the detective is essential, as is the complexity of the plot and the subtlety with which it is unfolded. The nature of the crime and the characterization of the criminal are deliberately sketchy because too great an emphasis on these elements would detract from the excitement of the intellectual chase. This is the tradition that includes such masters as Poe, Doyle, Sayers, Ellery Queen, Rex Stout and Ross Macdonald, and it is the tradition that has attracted the attention of those intellectuals who write the histories of the detective story, which is only natural: this is the type of detective story that intellectuals read. But for every reader of Sherlock Holmes hundreds read Old Sleuth, Cap Collier or Nick Carter; for every reader of Dorothy Sayers there were dozens of *Shadow Magazine* or Doc Savage readers; for every Rex Stout addict there are thousands who follow the exploits of Mike Hammer.

The mystery story has been collected and chronicled and reprinted; no such loving care has been lavished on the other principal detective story tradition, the action story of the pulp magazines. These were seldom collected, and when a rare Nick Carter (now on microfilm) or Old Sleuth can be found the cheap basswood pulp crumbles upon reading. But in these fragile volumes of he-man stories the popular (as opposed to the highbrow) image of the detective was born. It was the pulp magazine detective who took hold of the public's imagination.

The appeal of the mystery story has been analyzed at length by critics like Edmund Wilson and scholars like William Aydelotte. Both agree that the mystery reader is presented with a substitute universe with fixed and reasonable laws in which all events are significant (because they are clues), one where knowledge is power since it is an act of knowing that solves the case. In other words, it is a world where thought *is* action, a paradise for the intellectual.

In the action detective story, on the other hand, knowledge is *not* power; power is power. As George Orwell has pointed out, the action detective story tends to be a celebration of the power principle. This is not to say that complex plots are never encountered in action stories, but when they are their function is different than in the mystery. The reader is not expected to enjoy unraveling the mystery along with the detective; rather he is expected to enjoy watching the *hero* overcome an ordeal, this time an intellectual one, just as he has enjoyed watching the hero overcome such physical ordeals as beatings, gunshots and Dido's embraces. The action story's plot need not be logical; it need not even be worked out completely at the end. The action detective does not untie the Gordian knot—he slices it through with a karate chop or a secret knife hidden inside a trick decoder ring.

Action detectives are faced with the mysterious and they overcome it not with science but with strength and trickery; when science is used it is only a superior sort of mumbo-jumbo. Gimmickry abounds in the adventure story: ventriloquism, disguise, specially equipped cars, oriental styles of dirty fighting.

The action hero is faced with a challenge, the capture of a criminal whose identity, method and motive may very well be known to the reader and perhaps even to the hero at the beginning of the story. Every element in the story is intended to demonstrate the difficulty of the inevitable capture, thereby proving

the prowess of the detective. The action detective story is therefore a travesty on the epic form; it is a series of ordeals that exist only to be overcome by a hero with whom the reader identifies, a hero whose omnipotence the reader admires and comes to share. Since the action detective is a projection of the culture, his success is a demonstration of the culture's ability to repel all challenges. It is a ritual whose effect is to prove the strength of a culture and the weakness of those outside it. In other words it tends to increase that respect for the law that Hoover always maintained was the only real answer to the crime problem.

The mystery focuses on the *process* of solving the crime while the action detective story centers on the *capture* of the criminal. This makes the political symbolism of the action story more obvious than in the mystery. There are other differences as well. In the mystery ambiguities and eccentricities of character are not only tolerated: they are essential. Mystery heroes tend to be odd types, even defiant non-conformists. In the action story the hero is a purely projective hero; he must be an embodiment of all culturally admired values. In a class-structured or pluralistic culture he will be drawn only from the most admired class or ethnic types. Not only did Hoover have few non-whites in the F.B.I., but during the sixties he even began to make his long-standing requirement that applicants "look like agents" more specific: he began to demand that they conform to the "Zimmy image" (i.e., that they look like Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., star of *The F.B.I.* TV show).

Motive is one of the puzzles in the mystery, and in order to create suspense the motive, like the solution, must not be immediately obvious. In the action story evil character is the only permissible motive. The hero's motive for pursuing the criminal is the eternal hostility of good for evil. Nothing is allowed that might blur the clarity of this tension.

In short, the action detective story is an entirely different genre from the mystery. It emphasizes the criminal's capture and not his unmasking; it creates identification with the hero by making him a projection of cultural values; the plot is a series of ordeals by which a culture demonstrates its superiority over its enemies ("criminals"). These are the hallmarks of the *popular* detective hero, and a hundred years of loyalty demonstrates the depth of this formula's significance to the popular audience.

While there had been many action detective stories in American popular literature during the mid-nineteenth century, it was not until the first "Old Sleuth" story in George Munro's *Fireside Companion* in 1872 that a particular detective became famous. Story papers like *Fireside Companion* were the most important popular entertainment medium of the late nineteenth century. The field was dominated by two New York City publications, the *Ledger* of the fabulous Robert Bonner, and the *Weekly* of the long-lived firm of Street and Smith. It was in the *Weekly* that the career of the greatest of all action heroes was launched: Nick Carter in 1886. Nick Carter was created by John Coryell and then carried through over two hundred novels by Frederick Marmaduke Van Renselaer Dey (as late as 1943 there was a *Nick Carter, Master Detective* show, and today there are *new* paperback adventures of a *new* Nick Carter). The popularity of the story paper detective was astounding: by 1900 the British firm of

the Aldine Company had over two hundred and fifty different detective heroes in its stable, including the "Demon Detective," "The Jew Detective," "New York Nell, the Girl-Boy Detective," "Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective," "Old Stone-wall, the Shadower," "Lynx Eyes, the Pacific Detective," and "Old Electricity, the Lightning Detective." The popularity and durability of the action detective hero was so great that he survived the medium that had made him famous. At the end of the century the story papers were replaced by the weekly pulp magazines devoted either to the adventures of a single detective (e.g., *The Nick Carter Weekly*) or to types of action stories (*Adventure, Detective*). During the second decade of the century the detective hero entered the comic strips (the first being *Hawkshaw the Detective* after Tom Taylor's play *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*). The great twentieth century detective hero, *Dick Tracy*, arrived in 1929, the same year that *True Detective Mysteries*, the first radio detective show, went on the air. By 1930 the public's infatuation with the detective hero was almost manic. Munsey's *Detective Fiction Weekly* and Street and Smith's *Detective Story* and *Shadow Magazine* were only the leading detective pulps: there were dozens of others competing on the news-stands. On the back of cereal boxes Inspector Post implored kiddies to join the "Post Toasties Law and Order Patrol." This detective mania would continue throughout the thirties; there would be a *Sherlock Holmes* radio show as well as others starring Dick Tracy and Charlie Chan, while the decade would end with the *Superman* and *Captain Midnight* radio shows (both in 1940). Even today the popularity of the form on television is showing no signs of flagging.

What Hoover did was to infiltrate the action detective story. To do this he demonstrated the parallel between the actual cases of the F.B.I. and the plots of the action story. Then he persuaded writers, artists, film makers and other mass entertainment producers that they would do well to make F.B.I. agents the heroes of their fictional dramas.

To show the parallel between the work of the F.B.I. and that of the detective heroes, Hoover began in 1933 a series of articles and books that presented "true" cases of the F.B.I. These stories seem to be pointless publicity chasing unless Hoover's ultimate mythologizing strategy is kept in mind, and then a clear pattern emerges. In these magazine articles and books Hoover pointed out that the formulaic exploits of the detective hero were the everyday routine of the F.B.I. agent. In a 1937 speech, for example, he claimed that "life has been a great adventure for those of us who have been privileged to play a pioneering part in the field of progressive law enforcement."²⁰ In the action detective stories the hero is expected to know all crime fighting skills, and these constitute a rather conventionalized repertoire: fingerprinting, disguises, foreign languages, wire-tapping, stalking and tracking, unarmed combat and sharpshooting. It was Nick Carter's boast that he was the *master* detective, proficient in every means of combating crime. Therefore Hoover methodically went through all the detective routines and devoted one article to each of them, proving that the F.B.I. agent, or rather the Bureau itself as a collective hero, was also the master of all the traditional detective tricks. The moral of these "true cases from the files" is usually not explicitly stated, but it still cannot be missed. Hawkshaw, Sherlock

Holmes, Old Sleuth, Nick Carter: all are rank amateurs compared to the agents of the F.B.I. Sometimes Hoover did draw the comparison: "there is no magic in efficient law enforcement, no Sherlock Holmes theorizing or fictional deduction . . . before science all things must fall, including the ramparts of criminality."²¹ Hoover often argued that the cases he featured were significant because they posed theoretical challenges to one of the Bureau's scientific techniques. For example, one grisly piece described a gangster who had skin from his back grafted onto his fingers to defeat the Bureau's fingerprint system. Hoover seriously discussed this as a threat to the whole concept of scientific law enforcement, and so he carefully traced the methods the Bureau used to defend its system against this surgical refutation, and he drove home the point with stomach-turning photographs of the man's hands and back.

Hoover also had his publicists pre-package all the Bureau's major cases, so that when reporters came to write their stories about the F.B.I.'s exploits they would follow the approved adventure formula of clues, leads, colorful informants, crooks with nicknames, chases and gunfights. The Bureau's publicists also made sure that whenever the Bureau went after its man that he was never perceived as merely a small-time crook. Like the Shadow, Nick Carter or Superman, the F.B.I.'s criminals by definition had the status of "Public Enemies." They were major threats to society. When Hoover got finished with each F.B.I. case it was as good as a pulp magazine adventure, only better—it was real.

The Bureau Headquarters in Washington was turned into a shrine to the myth of the G-Man as detective hero. It was outfitted as an American Madame Toussaud's filled with death masks of criminals, tours of crime labs, trick-shooting, and fingerprinting for everybody. It was a Hall of Fame for detectives, and all the detectives so honored were G-Men.

Hoover worked hard during these years to make himself the personification of the Bureau. He publicized the number of his office phone as a direct link between any citizen with news of a kidnapping and the Director himself. He traveled about the country giving speeches invariably embellished with examples drawn from fresh cases still warm in the files. The publicity activities of the Bureau were feverish during the thirties, and were all calculated to create the impression that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was a veritable library of pulp magazine adventures. All of this was bait that could not fail to attract the attention of action story writers desperate for material, and before long writers everywhere were rising to the lure.

But Hoover was not one to wait for the fish to bite. He began very early to "plant" F.B.I. agents in fictional adventure stories by encouraging a friendly writer, Rex Collier, to go through the Bureau's files for material for the first of the fictional G-Men adventures, the comic strip "War on Crime." Next he went to work on Hollywood, and before long "Public Enemy" himself, James Cagney, was starring in *G-Men* as an apprentice agent being indoctrinated in Bureau ideology and trained in scientific crime-fighting. This was the beginning of a long list of G-Men movies that included *You Can't Get Away With It*, *The House on 92nd Street*, *Walk East on Beacon*, and *The F.B.I. Story*.

Rex Collier had been collaborating with the sensationally successful crime

radio show writer, Phillips H. Lord. The result was *G-Men*, with its identifying announcement "Calling the Police! Calling the G-Men! Calling all Americans to War on the Underworld!" This show, popular as it was, represented one of Hoover's rare setbacks. Lord was too headstrong and too much of a hotshot to accept for long Hoover's heavy-handed attempts to maintain control over the show. By 1936 Lord had changed the name of the show to "Gangbusters," had stopped identifying the heroes as F.B.I. agents, and, to add insult to injury, had replaced the F.B.I. agent who announced the show with Colonel Schwartzkopf, Hoover's hated publicity rival from the Lindbergh case.

It irked Hoover that there was not a satisfactory F.B.I. show on radio. When the post-World War II *The F.B.I. in Peace and War* was not to his liking, he finally produced his own, *This is Your F.B.I.* He appeared on the inaugural April 6, 1946, show himself. Eventually *Top Secrets of the F.B.I.* and *I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.* also featured agents as heroes.

Hoover's greatest success in infiltrating popular culture was in the pulp magazine field. The best of the pulp G-Man detectives was Norman Daniel's Dan Fowler, the F.B.I. hero of *G-Man Detectives Magazine*. Frederick C. Davis' entry was Secret Operator #5, Jimmie Christopher, in *Secret Operator #5 Magazine*. *The Feds* and *F.B.I. Detective* were also devoted to fictional G-Man exploits, and G-Man stories also appeared regularly in almost all of the other adventure pulps.

The editors of these pulps could count on getting personal letters of commendation from Hoover for running G-Man yarns that he liked, and William W. Turner has described how assiduously editors tailored their stories to conform to a formula that would win them such letters.²² For especially meritorious work an editor might be favored with a guest editorial or a "scientific" article by the Director. The name "J. Edgar Hoover" on the cover of a pulp was money in the bank for a publisher, and so once the pulp editors understood the rules of the game they were eager to play.

Hoover's success in associating his agents with action detective heroes and in turn filling fictional detective stories with F.B.I. characters was prodigious, as evidence from every form of thirties popular entertainment demonstrates. In 1932 Post Toasties had premium offers enticing kids into Inspector Post's Law and Order Patrol. By 1937 it had become the Melvin Purvis G-Man Law and Order Patrol. By the early 1940's Hoover and F.D.R. were regularly appearing in the first panels of comics giving the superheroes their assignments, and then in the last panel thanking them for saving the nation (or civilization, which amounted to the same thing). Most impressive of all, during the 1930's G-Men joined baseball players in the greatest of all tributes to the popular (or at least boyhood) hero, the bubble gum card. The "G-Men and Heroes of the Law" card series had literally hundreds of brightly colored accounts of the F.B.I.'s successes in defeating famous gangsters. These examples could be matched by many others, but perhaps one more may as well be mentioned: in a last, sad effort to keep alive one of the greatest of all popular heroes, Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy, finally became an agent of the "S.B.I.," the Scientific Bureau of Investigation. But there is no time for that.

By the winter of 1933 the mythic transformation of Hoover and the F.B.I. had begun, and within a few years it was very nearly complete: both had become legends. In the public mind the F.B.I. and its director had become confused with the fictional heroes of mass entertainment. If radio shows, comics and movies were part of the fantasy life of Americans, then Hoover and his men had occupied the station house in the American Dream. The effect on American culture of this mythologization was wide-ranging and it was profound.

The Bureau's approach to crime, both because of its history and because of the needs of the central government in a mass society, was that of symbolic management. It would seek to avoid responsibility for actual crimes but would deal with those symbolic offenses that had come to represent all crime in public opinion. The most important effect of Hoover's self-mythologization was to harden this approach into a national orthodoxy.

The symbolic approach to crime has been discussed here as the central authority's defensive response to events that threaten to destroy its image of effectiveness. The symbolic approach has a *positive* content as well: it views crime as an attack on the collective sentiments and values that are the basic sources of solidarity in a culture. Hoover's ideology essentially consisted of ethnocentrism within the American tradition of Christianity and individualism, so it is not surprising to find that his actions derive from this ethnocentric theory of crime; it is surprising to find that at times he used rather sophisticated language to communicate this theory to the public. In a 1939 speech he defined democracy as "the dictatorship of the collective conscience of our people,"²³ and he pointed to the law as the defender of that dictatorship. Hoover meant that the *real* significance of crime was that it was a threat to social cohesion and so had to be punished in such a way as to reestablish the strength of the collective conscience which the crime had weakened.

If the mass media is the effective repository of the popular consensus, as De Fleur and others have argued, then Hoover's treatment of crime as a public relations problem grows logically out of his ethnocentric convictions. If social solidarity is the highest good (and for Hoover it was), and if public opinion is society's *sense* of social solidarity, then it is in the area of public opinion that crime's effects are most to be feared. If crime as an image in public opinion is left uncombated it will create the image of a weak or nonexistent social solidarity, and will ultimately affect behavior by weakening conformity. Hoover was hostile to scientific criminologists because they urged the public to reject approaches to crime which treated crime principally as a symbolic threat to social solidarity. As Durkheim once observed, to a defender of cultural integration like Hoover, "theories which refuse to punishment any expiatory character appear as so many spirits subversive of the social order . . . these doctrines could be practiced only in a society where the whole collective conscience would be very nearly gone."²⁴

It is no easy task to impose a symbolic and ritualistic interpretation of crime on a modern and pluralistic society. There are too many people who refuse to treat the criminal as symbol: the American legal tradition tries to punish an individual only when he is personally responsible for his crime. Hoover, on

the other hand, wanted to punish the criminal for his symbolic significance, scarcely a matter for which he is legally responsible.

The identification of the F.B.I. agent with the detective hero of the fictional adventure stories contributed importantly to Hoover's success in imposing the ritualistic view of crime on American public opinion. Law enforcement in the detective story is a ritual; the hero and the criminal are stereotypes who are not really responsible for what they do. Their actions are simply typifying gestures that indicate their significance as symbols of good and evil. By identifying his agent with the fictional detective hero, Hoover was able to use the public's acceptance of the fictional hero's symbolism and ritual behavior to justify his agent's symbolism and ritual behavior. He lent the agent to crime fiction and in return borrowed popular entertainment's ritual interpretation of the law as justification for his Bureau's symbolic response to crime.

The ritualization of reality through myth has been thoroughly studied by the French semiologists, and in particular by Roland Barthes. Barthes writes that:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a clarity which is not that of explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured. In passing from history to myth, myth acts economically; it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, without any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without any contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide-open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.²⁵

Martin Jay explains this same phenomenon another way when he states that in mass culture there is characteristically "the substitution of mythic repetition for historical development."²⁶ Since the leader who provides symbolic (read alternatively mythic) solutions is dispensing clarity and simplicity, the result can be mass quiescence and reassurance; intense gratitude and affection will be bestowed upon the symbolic leader who provides an orderly and meaningful world view, a world view that obviously violates Einstein's dictum that a theory should be as simple as possible, but no simpler. Murray Edelman argues that "emotional commitment to a symbol is associated with contentment and quiescence regarding problems that would otherwise arouse concern. . . . One of the demonstrable functions of symbolization is that it induces a feeling of well-being: the resolution of tension."²⁷

It is possible that the cultural solidarity produced by Hoover's brand of symbolic reassurance was needed during the depression. Again quoting Edelman, "the leader's dramaturgical jousts with public problems make the world understandable and convey the promise of collective accomplishment to masses who are bewildered, uncertain and alone."²⁸ Certainly Hoover's contribution to the unexpected cultural solidarity that emerged in the United States during the depression ought not to be ignored by historians of the period.

Such solidarity, however, was purchased at a high price indeed. If crime has an sociological significance at all it is that some members of society either do not accept the values of society or that the structure of society makes it im-

possible for them to live by those values. In any case crime is an important index to the well-being of society, information about itself that a society can afford to ignore no more than a motorist can ignore his oil pressure gauge. For almost fifty years Hoover's real life police dramas excited the imagination of the American public. His rituals of crime and punishment reassured Americans that all was well in their society, that theirs was a moral universe, and perhaps every culture must have some means of providing this reassurance. But did Hoover contribute to the nation's understanding of itself, its problems and its needs? Or did he blind Americans to vital facts about their society and so help create a heritage of unresolved social tensions? It will be the answers to these questions that will finally fix J. Edgar Hoover's place in the history of American culture.

NOTES

¹This account follows Willard B. Gatewood, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Art of Controversy* (Baton Rouge, 1970), Ch. VIII.

²For these speeches see Max Lowenthal, *The Federal Bureau of Investigation* (New York: William Sloan, 1950), Ch. I.

³For a full discussion of this theory see Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana, Illinois, 1964).

⁴Edelman, p. 70; p. 78.

⁵Henry R. Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1956), p. 333.

⁶Quoted in Lowenthal, p. 15.

⁷J. Edgar Hoover, quoted in Lowenthal, p. 19.

⁸See Howard Sackler's play *The Great White Hope* for a fictional account of this.

⁹*American Magazine* 144 (July, 1947).

¹⁰Lowenthal, Ch. 4; Chs. 14-23; Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare* (Minneapolis, 1955).

¹¹Don Whitehead, *The F.B.I. Story* (New York, 1956), p. 92.

¹²Quoted in Whitehead, p. 97.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁴Jack Alexander, "Profile, The Director," *The New Yorker* 13 (Sept. 25, 1937), p. 22.

¹⁵George Orwell, "Raffles and Miss Blandish" in *A Collection of Essays* (New York, 1954), p. 153.

¹⁶Alexander, p. 24.

¹⁷Quoted in William W. Turner, *Hoover's F.B.I.* (New York: Dell, 1970), p. 105.

¹⁸Quoted by Turner, p. 118.

¹⁹Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (New York, 1965), p. 48.

²⁰J. Edgar Hoover, "The Adventure of Scientific Crime Control," in *Vital Speeches* (July 1, 1937), p. 562.

²¹"Scientific Crime Control," p. 561.

²²Turner, p. 121. Characteristically, pulp editors picked Hoover's writings out of the public domain (Congressional Record or press releases). Thus, according to Louis B. Nichols, the pulps' use of Hoover material was "tolerated" but not "encouraged."

²³J. Edgar Hoover, "Fifty Years of Crime," in *Vital Speeches* (January 1, 1939), p. 509.

²⁴Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York, 1933), p. 108.

²⁵Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, 1972), p. 143.

²⁶Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston, 1973), p. 187.

²⁷Edelman, p. 38.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 91.

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