

# Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar*

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J. Edgar Hoover, instrumental in founding the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1935 and who headed the national police agency until his death, was a central and malignant figure in American political life for nearly half a century.

Serving under eight US presidents, Hoover (1895-1972) was a virulent and life-long opponent of socialism. Under his guidance, the FBI was synonymous with harassment and persecution of political opponents and a profound hostility to democratic rights. Hoover also accumulated files on presidents and their spouses, on rivals and potential rivals, and virtually anyone in a position of power in Washington, enabling him, by means of threats and blackmail, to maintain his own private fiefdom.

Clint Eastwood's new movie *J. Edgar*, as its intimate title suggests, is more than anything else a character study of the FBI director, spanning the years 1919 to 1972. While the film touches upon various significant episodes in Hoover's career, from the First Red Scare of 1919-20 to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the script by Dustin Lance Black, a gay writer and activist (responsible for the screenplay for *Milk* [2008]), concentrates on the FBI chief's personality and personal relations.

Despite a bravura performance by Leonardo DiCaprio as Hoover and the obvious attention paid in certain segments to getting details right, the film meanders across the century, seemingly uncertain of (or perhaps shamefaced about) its central themes and, in the end, oddly apolitical, despite its intensely political subject matter. Eastwood apparently means to pay tribute to Hoover as a relentless policeman and defender of the American order, but the final portrait is hardly a flattering one and *J. Edgar* will surely not win many new admirers for its central figure or the FBI.

As the film opens, Hoover (Leonardo DiCaprio), nearing the end of his life, is dictating his memoirs, a plot device that allows *J. Edgar* to move back and forth in time in an effort to create a psychological profile of the man and, to a decidedly lesser extent, a picture of his times.

*J. Edgar* turns to Hoover's early days in federal law enforcement, and we soon learn that he requires absolute, unquestioning loyalty from his associates and subordinates. His two enduring collaborators are his executive assistant of 54 years, Helen Gandy (Naomi Watts), and Clyde Tolson (Armie Hammer), the FBI's associate director. Hoover and Tolson worked closely, ate their meals, socialized and went on vacation together. The film implies they were lovers, and notes that Tolson inherited Hoover's estate when the latter died.

According to Black and Eastwood, it was his relationship with his mother, Annie Hoover (Judi Dench), that did much to shape Hoover's extraordinarily repressed and repressive psychological make-up. The FBI director lived with this imperious woman until her death in 1938, when he was 43.

In Eastwood's film, Annie grooms Edgar to "restore our family to

greatness," and predicts he "will rise to become one of the most powerful men in the country." She corrects his stammer, picks out his clothes for him and harshly warns him against the consequences of effeminacy. In one of the movie's most humane scenes, Hoover, in full tailspin after his mother's death, lovingly dons her jewelry and holds up one of her dresses, before collapsing to the floor in a tearful heap.

*J. Edgar* devotes time and energy to what Eastwood presents as Hoover's major positive contribution. As the movie's production notes blithely state: "He was a catalyst for modern forensics and created a system of federal laws that transformed our country in a multitude of ways that remain relevant today."

To lend credence to this argument about Hoover's legacy, *J. Edgar* spends an inordinate amount of time on the Charles Lindbergh baby kidnapping in 1932, in the course of which the FBI director supposedly hones his police methods and investigative techniques. In a small-scale parallel to the post-9/11 reality, Hoover uses the tragedy to press Congress for more money and more power.

In general, as a political study, *J. Edgar* has enormous gaps and weaknesses. One of its opening sequences, for example, deals with the bombing of the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer (Geoff Pierson) in June 1919, by anarchists. A youthful Hoover is outraged, and the ensuing Palmer Raids, in which some 10,000 people were rounded up, many beaten and abused, hundreds deported, are presented as a legitimate reaction to eight terrorist bombs.

This event apparently ignites in Hoover a passion for stamping out what Eastwood terms in an interview the "Bolshevik invasion," and launches a career whose aim is to develop the tools of modern police work.

In actuality, the anarchist bombings were an ineffectual *response* to a full throttle assault on left-wing forces during World War I. Federal and state authorities had declared war on anti-war sentiment, labor militancy, which reached a height in the Seattle General Strike of 1919, and support for the Russian Revolution. Violent attacks on and even lynchings of left-wing activists, including IWW leader Frank Little in Butte, Montana in August 1917, were a regular occurrence.

The film depicts the arrest and deportation hearing of "alien" Emma Goldman (Jessica Hecht), but US citizens such as Eugene Debs and other working class leaders were also victims of government repression.

After covering the Lindbergh case, *J. Edgar* depicts the FBI director operating on numerous fronts in the 1930s, including public relations. Eastwood's Hoover shifts public opinion from an infatuation with gangsters, manifested in such films as *Public Enemy*, to an admiration for the FBI and other law enforcement agencies (in movies like *G Men*). Hoover also hobnobs with film industry glamour, dating--he informs an outraged and jealous Tolson--actress Dorothy Lamour and nightclubbing awkwardly with Ginger Rogers (Jamie LaBarber) and

her mother Lela (Lea Thompson).

Speaking of Hollywood, however, conspicuously absent in Eastwood's work is any reference to the FBI's infamous role in the anticommunist witchhunts of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the bureau persecuted Communist Party members and aided in the purge of left-wing elements from American political and cultural life. Hoover covertly and illegally shared FBI files and information with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), starting in 1947, making possible the blacklist and purges in Hollywood.

Also unmentioned is Hoover's masterminding of COINTELPRO, the massive and illegal covert operation aimed against left-wing, civil rights and anti-war groups from 1956 to 1971, involving the infiltration of thousands of agents and hundreds of "black bag jobs." Fred Hampton of the Black Panthers was assassinated in Chicago in 1969 as part of COINTELPRO. Civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo was slandered after her murder in Alabama at the hands of a car full of Ku Klux Klansmen, one of whom was an FBI informant, as part of another COINTELPRO operation.

*J. Edgar* does pay attention to Hoover's blackmailing efforts. The FBI director threatens Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (Jeffrey Donovan) with evidence of his brother's liaison with an East German woman. Later on, Hoover and Tolson snicker over a love letter from reporter Lorena Hickok to Eleanor Roosevelt. At the film's end, President Richard Nixon (Christopher Shyer) delivers a glowing eulogy for Hoover, even as his agents ransack the latter's office in a fruitless search for the secret files.

In another scene, Hoover listens with icy impassivity to tape recordings of Martin Luther King, Jr. having a sexual encounter in a hotel room. Hoover labels King, whom he describes as surrounded by communists, the "greatest domestic threat" and organizes a dirty tricks operation aimed unsuccessfully at forcing the black civil rights leader to turn down the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

Nonetheless, one would be hard-pressed to mention all the missing historical landmarks in *J. Edgar*, some of them inevitable perhaps, some of them inexcusable.

The film's cast performs well, DiCaprio turning in a remarkably convincing Hoover and adeptly maneuvering between decades. Hammer and Watts are also fine as his closest associates and co-conspirators, although the presentation of Tolson as Hoover's liberal foil and personal conscience, while perhaps dramatically useful, strikes one as historically unlikely.

The film's jumping from one time period to another is occasionally confusing and at times seems to lack any particular purpose, except to break up the supposed monotony of a more straightforward chronology. *J. Edgar* also lingers on screen about 30 or 40 minutes too long, often an indicator that the filmmakers are unclear about what they want to say and, as a result, how to conclude matters.

Hoover was no doubt a significant, if repugnant personality, and worthy of treating on film, but what does Eastwood's *J. Edgar* add up to, in the end?

Hoover's anti-communist ravings are not presented in a positive light in *J. Edgar*, but the film is oddly noncommittal about his views and methods: was he a necessary evil, or simply evil? Overall, the movie's pendulum swings more towards the former conclusion.

Is Eastwood, generally considered one of Hollywood's leading conservatives, a confused "libertarian" with law and order views, well placed to evaluate Hoover's part in history? No doubt sharing Hoover's anti-communism, Eastwood pays homage in his film to

Hoover's creation, the FBI, whose terror methods have never abated. In fact, the director boasts in any interview that he has "great respect for the FBI," which "was tremendously enthusiastic about us doing this film."

However, in so far as he is an honest, if limited, artist, Eastwood is obliged to include many damning facts about Hoover, which, in any case, are so well-known as to make their suppression impossible.

There may be other impulses at work which help account for the film's lack of clear focus. Floating in the air seems to be the notion that Hoover's repressed homosexuality, his lifetime of being "in the closet," was perhaps partly responsible for his brutality and repression of others. In that case, his notorious "secret files," with which he ruthlessly threatened so many, might well stand for his own secret desires, through whose suppression he destroyed himself.

And coming from another direction is DiCaprio's performance. Clearly, the liberal-minded actor was bent on conveying, in the form of a warning, something about the power amassed and danger represented by such a deranged personality.

Another reality, however, is missed by the filmmakers. The question arises as to how such a figure--a megalomaniac and paranoid--rose to power, and held onto it for so many decades?

For that, one needs to have some greater perspective on the position and development of American capitalism, with which Hoover so zealously identified himself, in the 20th century. The great overshadowing event of Hoover's life, which essentially shaped everything he did, was the Russian Revolution in 1917. He came of age at that time, and along with the rest of the more astute defenders of the existing social order in the US, recognized revolutionary socialism, if it could find mass support, as the single greatest existential threat. That understanding never left him, and correctly so, in his scheme of things.

In that sense, rather than viewing Hoover as a freak or an aberration, it is more profound to see him as the distilled, human expression of the fears aroused by the October Revolution in the American ruling elite and its counter-revolutionary response.

The stakes were high and Hoover had no time or patience for democracy and constitutional rights. Infiltration, provocation, murder, is this not how US imperialism currently operates on the world arena? Not seriously grasped by the inconsistent *J. Edgar*, Hoover was a necessary evil only from the point of view of the present, oppressive order.



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