J. Edgar Hoover’s Abuse Of Power Essay, Research Paper

John Edgar Hoover’s Abuse of Power

John Edgar Hoover, an American criminologist and government official, directed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for 48 years. Hoover was born on January 1, 1895 in Washington, D.C. After standing out among his peers, Hoover went on to study law at George Washington University. After receiving a law degree from George Washington in 1917, Hoover joined the staff of the U.S. Department of Justice where he earned $1200 a year. Two years later, Hoover was named special assistant to the U.S. attorney general. Soon, in 1924, he was named head of the Bureau of Investigation of the Justice Department. Later, in 1935, when the department became the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Hoover was appointed its director. He was leader of the FBI under every president from Calvin Coolidge to Richard Nixon. As director, John Edgar succeeded in establishing an exceptional record of positive changes in law enforcement, establishing intense training schools for teaching crime detection methods to special agents, and creating an organized fingerprint file on millions of Americans. Despite these improvements and contributions, Hoover was often accused of abusing his power and exceeding the jurisdiction of the FBI. Under Hoover’s reign as Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the power of the FBI was greatly abused. Hoover’s FBI carried out thousands of illegal break-ins, illegally monitored and recorded conversations, manipulated the Supreme Court, interfered with the American people’s official and constitutional rights to freedom of speech and freedom of political expression, and blackmailed hundreds of congressmen, senators, and presidents. To this day, Hoover’s past actions still provoke controversy.

Under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI held millions of detailed files and illegal wiretaps that contained top-secret information on millions of Americans. These files and recordings contained damaging facts about sexual, political, and financial information of the country’s most powerful and influential people. Hoover kept personal files on every politician who passed through Washington. Investigative reports were held on popular icons like Eleanor Roosevelt that included allegations of Roosevelt’s extramarital affairs. Hoover’s FBI also possessed reports of investigations of the possible homosexuality of future U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Another secret file was created regarding a member of Congress whose wife allegedly had an affair with an African American and a post office employee. Hoover also held criminal files that recorded FBI investigations of rapists, murderers, spies, con artists, arsonists, blackmailers, and agents of foreign countries. In addition, John Hoover held personal information files on thousands of innocent people who took stands against his views and actions. Hoover kept all highly confidential information including presidential personal reports, memos, letters, memos, photos, case summaries, microphone and wiretaps, and recordings of special investigations, in two concealed files in his personal secretary’s office. These secret files guaranteed J. Edgar Hoover a secure job and ensured his safety from exposure and criticism. He could use these files to blackmail members of Congress, presidents, and other people in the government. In tapes recorded of former President, Richard Nixon, Nixon clearly stated that he was afraid to remove Hoover from office because he feared Hoover would “bring down the temple”(Kessler 300) by releasing damaging information of him to the public. The Bureau even sent agents to find out if Hoover held any damaging files on members of Congress because they feared Hoover’s blackmail files so greatly. Administration often accepted many of Hoover requests. He was continuously re-appointed the administration suspected Hoover held secret files on them. The Senate Select Committee disclosed that Hoover had done illegal investigations for several presidents including Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. Hoover supplied these leaders with information on many of their political opponents. With his secret files and detailed information about millions of Americans in the general public and in the government, Hoover’s power was not contested.

During Hoover’s direction of the FBI, a new operation called COINTELPRO was established. COINTELPRO was the code name the FBI gave to procedures targeted at political and social protest groups that it considered to be disruptive. COINTELPRO was aimed at protesting groups like the Communist Party USA, the Socialist Workers Party, black nationalists groups, New Left Movement groups, the Ku Klux Klan, and against American Indian Movement of Puerto Rican Nationalists. The goal of the program was to disrupt each group so that they would be stripped of any political force. The first target of COINTELPRO was the American Communist Party. Although Hoover claimed that this group was a major threat to the United States, the American Communist Party had little influence and was of little threat to America. He secretly requested the White Houses’ approval for a specific program that would disturb the A.C.P.’s activities and told members of the National Security Council to stop the party by any means necessary. His actions from 1956-1971 on the A.C.P. and on other groups violated millions of their Constitutional rights. Hoover proposed many ideas to the National Security Council. He planned to perform secret break-ins and intercept mail of the members of the A.C.P. He suggested that telephones be wiretapped, hidden microphones be used, and that garbage be inspected. Hoover also intended to encourage fights between members of the group and send controversial newspaper articles and other controversial sources to stir up conflict within the group. In addition, he planned to send anonymous letters of marital adultery to spouses of many A.C.P. members. These proposals were not objected by anyone on the Council. Hoover not only planned to practice these techniques on the A.C.P., but he also intended to use them on rebels, civil liberators, war protestors, and politically active Americans. John Edgar’s conduct cost the government tens of millions of dollars and required thousands of agents to operate. After word of Hoover’s misdeeds was leaked to the public, Hoover decided to disassemble the operation immediately to avoid public embarrassment. Although Hoover was using the excessive power he had always displayed, he was not immune to public opinion and was forced to discontinue his illegal plans.

Another target of COINTELPRO was launched in 1968 when Hoover focused much of his energy on erasing the effects of black activist organizations. Hoover specifically instructed his agents to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and neutralize numerous African-American leaders. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of those leaders. Hoover made information of King’s sexual activities available to the press and presented tapes to reporters that contained many of Dr. King’s conversations. After King criticized the FBI’s ineffectiveness in protecting the rights of black Americans, Hoover responded by saying that Dr. King was a “notorious liar”(Israel 73) and that “moral degenerates were leading the civil rights movement”(Israel 73). Hoover’s dislike toward King became so intense that Hoover placed at least eight illegal wiretaps and 16 electronic listening devices on Martin Luther King’s phones. He also ordered tapes containing disturbing information to be played back to King’s wife. Hoover even sent an anonymous letter to King’s home suggesting he commit suicide. To this day, many people, including the House Select Committee of Assassinations, believe James Earl Ray’s assassination of Martin Luther King was a result of a FBI conspiracy. It has also been speculated that there was possible involvement of Hoover and the FBI in the deaths of several other Black Panther leaders including Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, and Mark Clark. It was evident that J. Edgar Hoover exceeded the boundaries of the FBI in order to prevent the expanded rights of black Americans.

In addition to other abuses, Hoover treated his employees like slaves. According to former FBI agent in Dallas Oliver Revell, if Hoover had treated his employees in such a way today, “Hoover would have been prosecuted under today’s standards”(Kessler 6). Hoover forced his workers to maintain his yard, build fences around his house, prepare tax returns, replace sod, move shrubbery, construct sidewalks, dig fish ponds, paint his house, and shower Hoover with frequent gifts. Thought his behavior, it was obvious Hoover felt superior to the people who worked for him.

In viewing Hoover’s control of the FBI, perhaps Tom Hayden, a respected Senator over many years in the California legislature, said it best when he stated “This is a case of the abuse of power in extremis, in one of the most, if not the most, democratic societies in the world. Hoover is the evidence of some profound flaw in American democracy. I can’t account for it. I don’t know what people were doing. I don’t know what our past presidents were thinking”(Jeffreys 66). Hoover’s FBI generated curiosity, fear, and conspiracies. It obtained immense information and penetrated deeply into the private lives of millions of Americans. Hoover preserved his power by telling presidents and members of Congress that he knew of all of their offenses. Hoover’s FBI blackmailed America, disrupted political movements, and violated the rights of millions of Americans. J. Edgar Hoover truly abused all of the power he possessed.