J.Edgar Hoover Essay, Research Paper

J. Edgar Hoover was a young 25-year-old when he became the acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations. His first federal job was as a clerk in the files division, and he quickly became one of the most respected and feared men in the free world. Even presidents knew better than to cross him.

A consummate politician, Hoover was one of the first to ride the “media train” to power. He used the media as a tool and he knew that what people read and what they see and hear directly affect what they think.

A brief biography, as an introduction to the man will aid us in the understanding of who he was, and through this we may gain incite into the reasons for why he did the things he did. Hoover was born New Years Day 1895 in Washington D.C. the youngest of three children. He had an older brother and sister that lived and an older sister that died as a baby. His mother, Annie Hoover had the greatest influence on him as a child. She was strong willed and militaristic in her approach to raising her children and running a family. She instilled in him a strong sense of right and wrong, and taught him the work ethic for which he would live by. Hoover was a winner, during his school years and beyond. As a boy Hoover was afflicted with a speech impediment. He was so determined to overcome this handicap that he read aloud for hours a day until he no longer stuttered. Hoover was short and slight in stature but he was athletic and quite agile.

He was a member of his high school track team that went all-American. He was on the debate team and did quite well. This is probably where he got his combative nature. He was also the captain of his ROTC company in college. Giving him the leadership skills that he would need in later years. Hoover graduated near the top of his class from George Washington University with a bachelor’s degree in Law. (Powers, pp.48-52) With all of this going for him one might expect him to join the army as an officer as other men his age were being drafted to war, but as sole provider for his mother he was exempt from the draft.

He also got his first taste of federal service when his uncle got him a position as a clerk in the files office of the Department of Justice. He quickly rose in the Dept. in part because of the void left by other men his age being drafted. After several successful posts he was finally made acting Chief of the General Bureau of Investigation in 1924. (Bardsley, Ch.2, pp.1-2)

Media coverage came quickly for Hoover as he was involved in several high profile busts early in his career. In the early thirties a crime wave was hitting the mid-west. This gangster era was marked by names such as John Dillenger, Pretty Boy Floyd, Machine Gun Kelly, and Ma Barker. This was a time of depression and prohibition, a time when distrust of lawmen and the government was at an all time high. Newspapers and magazines celebrated the crimes and the criminals. (Bardsley, Ch.4, pp.1) Some of the criminals burned mortgages and loan papers as they robbed the banks, this turned them into modern day Robin Hoods and they were made into folk heroes. His first bust involved the capture of Machine Gun Kelly. Hoover made the arrest at Kelly’s farm without the firing of one bullet. The newspapers loved it.

They praised Hoover and the articles made up ground in the public trust. The Bureau was taking on a whole new image with the American people. (Bardsley, Ch.4, pp.2)

His future media attention would not be so clean. When John Dillenger, a convicted bank robber, and Public Enemy Number One, escapes from prison another Special Agent, Melvin Purvis, asks for Hoover’s help. They set Dillenger up with the help of a local madam and Dillenger is gunned down in an alleyway as he leaves a theater. Again the media swarms over this real-life drama. This time they are not as generous to Hoover with their praise. Purvis gets all of the credit for the shooting. This enrages Hoover and he will never get over it. He resents Purvis from here on out. Together the dynamic duo track down and kill Pretty Boy Floyd. This time Hoover receives a little more praise from the papers but not enough. Purvis still gets “top billing”. Much to Hoover’s disgust, Purvis then tracks down and kills Baby Face Nelson almost single handedly.

Hoover never forgives Purvis for hogging all of the glory for the gangster killings. Eventually Purvis is harassed into leaving the Bureau. Even after he left Hoover interfered with jobs that Purvis tried to apply for. Melvin Purvis committed suicide in 1960 using the same gun that he had used to kill Dillenger (Bardsley, Ch.4, p.3)

Hoover was very much willing to accept someone else’s glory and publicity. In 1932, the highly publicized kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindburg’s infant son caught the attention of the American public and tore at the hearts of every mother and father. Hoover, wanting to play a role in the capture of the kidnappers, Flew to New Jersey, only to be turned away by the acting chief of police on the case. When New York City police finally caught the murderer, Hoover rushed to New York to get in on the photo opportunity and share in the publicity. The public was led to believe that Hoover and the Bureau had solved the case, when really they played an insignificant role.

The studios in Hollywood did not stand idle through all of this excitement. (Bardsley, Ch.4, p.4) The real life drama and excitement captured the attention of young and old alike. Hollywood didn’t take long to cash in on the action. A new type of super cop called a G-man was the new action hero of the silver screen. Hoover and the Bureau were movie stars. James Cagney starred in a movie called G-men, that had a great impact on the public image of the Bureau. The public believed what they saw. Hoover was now Public Hero Number One. The public saw the Bureau as an agency unto itself, not just part of the Justice Department. (Bardsley, Ch.4, p.4) Hoover controlled the story lines and content of several movies and radio shows. Children even knew the name of J. Edgar Hoover. Several comic books glorifying the exploits of the Bureau and its G-men were sold to kids.

Hoover was delighted with this image and it started to go to his head. Journalist Courtney Cooper wrote some twenty-three feature stories romanticizing the adventures of the FBI agents for American Magazine. Cooper’s FBI was a crime fighting machine whose effectiveness, which verged on the edge of omnipotence, was completely the result of J. Edgar Hoover’s leadership; his care in selecting and training his agents, his skill in leading them, the technical facilities he had assembled to interpret evidence. The feats of derring-do, the miracles of crime lab wizardry…”(Powers, pp. 288) .

Later Hoover wanted his own high-profile arrests. His first target was the current “Public Enemy Number One” at the time, Alvin Karpis. Karpis was a member of the notorious Barker gang. When police finally cornered him, Hoover was called in to make the arrest. The arresting officers were actually agents Clarence Hurt and Dwight Brantley. (Holt, p. 281) When police surrounded bank robber, Harry Burnett, Hoover was again brought in for the arrest and the pictures that followed. These are just a few of the examples that illustrate Hoover’s concern with public image and his manipulation of the papers to shape that image.

In my opinion, Hoover was a master at marketing and selling himself. His contributions to police work and to the country are undeniable. J. Edgar Hoover was an intelligent man. He did bring crime fighting out of the dark ages. He was the first to use fingerprinting as a tool to combat crime. He compiled huge databases of fingerprints. Encouraging the public to do so by pictures and film of Hoover fingerprinting celebrities and politicians. He was also instrumental in starting the first training academy for agents. These facts cannot be argued but neither can the fact that he manipulated the media for his own self-gain. He was a charismatic politician and respected leader. I also believe that he was a calculating self-fulfilling egomaniac.

Powers, Richard, Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover. The Free Press, 1987

Bardsley, Marilyn, J. Edgar Hoover, (http://crimelibrary.com)