



J. Edgar Hoover in 1924.  
Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs  
Division.

## Hoover, J. Edgar (1895-1972)

by Tina Gianoulis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Although never elected to any office, J. Edgar Hoover wielded tremendous political power in the United States government for almost five decades, and through eight presidencies, as head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Under his leadership, the Bureau developed from a weak and ineffectual collection of political appointees into one of the most efficient police agencies in the world.

It also developed into an undercover secret police that frequently used illegal means to gather damaging information, not only on criminals and political dissidents, but also on political leaders as well. Although Hoover was always in the front lines of government attempts to harass homosexual liberation movements, rumors that he himself was gay followed him throughout his career.

Hoover entered government service naturally. He was born on New Year's day, 1895, in Washington, D. C. into a middle class family with a history of working for the federal government. His grandfather, father, uncle, and brother had government jobs, so, after obtaining B. A. and M. A. degrees in law from George Washington University, it seemed logical for Hoover to go to work for the government as well.

His first job was with the Library of Congress, where he honed his already hyper-organized nature and learned filing systems that he would put to good use later in life.

He was a devoted son, and, as World War I approached, he looked for ways to avoid being called into military service and forced to leave his aging parents alone. His uncle, who worked for the Department of Justice, came up with the solution--a DOJ job that would exempt Hoover from the draft.

Hoover went to work for the Justice Department in 1917 as a clerk, but moved up quickly by virtue of his efficiency and his vigorous action against Communists and radicals during the late 1910s and 1920s. He supervised the deportation of foreign-born radicals in the great strike wave of 1919.

In 1924, he was appointed head of the Bureau of Investigation of the Justice Department (renamed Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935). Hoover immediately began to tighten up the slack Bureau, ending the system of political appointments and firing or retraining all of the existing agents. New agents were hired and promoted based on merit and strict performance reviews. He used his library experience to re-organize records and files, and he began amassing his famous "secret files," confidential information, often illegally obtained, which he kept to use against anyone who might threaten his power or tenure.

Hoover soon became both famous and feared for his zealous campaigns against such criminal and "subversive" groups as the Communist Party and the Ku Klux Klan. During the prohibition era, his "G-men" hunted down and caught many prominent gangsters, such as Al Capone and John Dillinger.

During the 1950s, he participated fully in the McCarthy witch hunts, zealously seeking out Communists and fellow-travelers.

Along with pursuing Communist sympathizers, Hoover also led a campaign of harassment directed at the new "homophile" groups such as the Mattachine Society, which sprang up to protest mistreatment of gay men and lesbians. F. B. I. agents took pictures and license plate numbers at demonstrations and infiltrated meetings and conferences of the fledgling homophile groups.

Many believe that Hoover took this anti-gay stance to cover his own homosexuality. Although he constantly (and violently) denied it, whispers about his sexuality followed Hoover throughout his career. For example, a 1943 internal F. B. I. memo reported claims that the director was homosexual.

Hoover's lifestyle fit many gay stereotypes: he was a sharp, dandified dresser, known for his white linen suits and silk handkerchiefs, who collected antiques and lived with his mother until her death when he was 42. He was never known to have even one date with a woman, yet he had several intimate relationships with men, notably a more than forty-year relationship with the handsome Clyde Tolson, his second in command at the F. B. I.

Hoover and Tolson rode to work together, ate lunch and dinner together most days, and took vacations together. Many observers described their relationship as marriage-like. Although some commentators believe that Hoover's rigid morality and strict religious beliefs would not have permitted him to have a physical relationship with a man, the rumors of his homosexuality were accelerated by the appearance, after their deaths, of photographs of Hoover and Tolson in drag, photographs that were allegedly Mafia blackmail pictures.

If Hoover and Tolson were homosexual, as seems more and more likely, their roles as persecutors of other homosexuals casts into bold relief the nightmare-like quality of the McCarthy era's war on homosexuality.

Hoover remained in charge of the F. B. I. until his death from a heart attack on May 2, 1972.

### **Bibliography**

DeLoach, Cartha. *Hoover's FBI: The Inside Story by Hoover's Trusted Lieutenant*. Washington, D. C.: Regney Publications, 1995.

"J. Edgar Hoover." Court TV's Crime Library website. [www.crimelibrary.com/gangsters\\_outlaws/cops\\_others/hoover/6.html?sect=18](http://www.crimelibrary.com/gangsters_outlaws/cops_others/hoover/6.html?sect=18)

Powers, Richard. *G-men: Hoover's FBI in American Pop Culture*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983.

Summers, Anthony. *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*. New York: Pocket Books, 1994.

### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.