

# Young J. Edgar: Hoover, the Red Scare, and the Assault on Civil Liberties

*by* KENNETH D. ACKERMAN



J. Edgar Hoover in 1920. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

*Washington, D.C., May 10, 1924, four years after the Palmer Raids.*

The door closed and J. Edgar Hoover found himself alone with his boss, Harlan Fiske Stone, the new Attorney General of the United States. “He told me brusquely to sit down and looked at me intently over the desk,” Edgar recalled years later, telling the story for the hundredth time.<sup>i</sup> He snapped to the command. Stone cut an imposing figure. He stood six and a half feet tall, weighed 250 pounds, was almost twice Edgar’s age of 29, and a full head higher. Stone loved fishing, and proudly displayed a medal he’d won from the Long Island Country Club for hauling in a 36-ounce trout.

Stone wasted no time on small talk. Edgar tried to raise administrative odds and ends, but Stone cut him off. “Then he said to me ‘Young man, I want you to be Acting Director of the Bureau of Investigation.’”<sup>ii</sup>

J. Edgar Hoover still had boyish good looks in 1924: wavy dark hair, a bright face, and flashy brown eyes. He dressed smart in the latest fashions, double-breasted suits, vests, spats, cashmeres and tweeds, crisp white shirts, like any other up and coming child of the Jazz Age. He spit out his words in a confident fast staccato, a delivery he had forced on himself as a teenager to stop stuttering. He had to be thrilled at the offer. The new Attorney General was paying him a stunning compliment and offering a rare career opportunity. He looked back across the desk at Stone and studied the older man’s brown eyes peering back over his glasses, the bushy eyebrows, the massive forehead, the receding brown hair.

“I’ll take the job, Mr. Stone, but only on certain conditions,” he answered. Harlan Stone gave a quizzical look. It took a rare cockiness for anyone, certainly a youngster like J. Edgar Hoover, to play coy at a moment like this, on being offered a top Federal post.

Stone had spent weeks trying to decide whom to pick as the new chief for the Bureau of Investigation. Scandal engulfed Washington in 1924, the notorious “Teapot Dome,” named for the stretch of Wyoming desert that held one of the United States Navy’s principal oil reserves. Interior Secretary Albert B. Fall faced prison for leasing these lands to oil industry friends in 1922 in exchange for bribes, prompting a criminal prosecution making headlines across the country. But the scandal went deeper. Senate hearings that spring had uncovered a sewer of corruption at the Department of Justice and its Bureau of Investigation: graft and kickbacks from gangsters and bootleggers, agents with criminal records, badges being issued to private provocateurs (called “dollar-a-year men”) who grew rich on extortion, and Bureau agents assigned to harass members of Congress. As the details came out, insiders tagged Justice with a new name: the Department of Easy Virtue.

In March 1924, a new President, Calvin Coolidge, brought in a new Attorney General to clean up the mess, an old-line reformer and long-time dean of New York’s Columbia University Law School. This new man was Harlan Fiske Stone.

Reaching Washington in April 1924, Stone barely knew where to start. “When I became Attorney General, the Bureau of Investigation was ... in exceedingly bad odor,” he recalled.<sup>iii</sup> Reaching the Justice Department building on Vermont Avenue, Stone found himself an outsider, surrounded by strangers. “I don’t know whom to trust; I don’t know any of these people,” he lamented.<sup>iv</sup>

Installing a new chief at the Bureau of Investigation would be his biggest step yet. The day before, on May 9, 1924, he had fired the Bureau’s corrupt sitting Director, a cigar-chomping, wise-cracking former private detective named William J. Burns. Now, to replace him – at least temporarily -- he had sent for J. Edgar Hoover.

Edgar had no social pedigree and no Ivy League diploma. He had earned his law degree from George Washington University and his father had been a mere government clerk, a map printer at the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. And he was so young, younger than most of the Bureau agents he'd be expected to supervise. Would they respect him? Would he have the backbone to stand up to older entrenched powers? Oddly, Harlan Stone thought yes. Who could miss the hard work, the professional polish, the competence of the young man? Stone frequently saw Edgar working long hours at the office, staying well past dinner each night and routinely working on weekends. Edgar had a command of detail, an ability to decide questions, and a willingness to give orders. He seemed to have no social life, no girl friends and few close office buddies. Other than belonging to a handful of men's clubs like the Masons, the Sigma Delta and Kappa Alpha fraternities, and the University Club, he made his job his life.

And now, this latest wrinkle -- the fact that this young J. Edgar Hoover had the composure and confidence to set his own conditions on the job as Bureau Chief -- only deepened Harlan Stone's growing respect.

“What are they?” the Attorney General asked.

Edgar had come prepared. As Stone studied him from across his polished desktop, he proceeded to lay out an agenda of ideas that couldn't help but impress even the most zealous reformer. “The Bureau must be divorced from politics and not be a catch-all for political hacks. Appointments must be based on merit. Promotions will be made only on proven ability. And the bureau will be responsible only to the Attorney General.”

Despite his age, Edgar already counted himself a Justice Department veteran by 1924, having worked there for seven years since starting in 1917 as a 22-year-old clerk. It had been Edgar's first job after earning his law degree, and he'd made the most of it.

America had entered World War I during that summer of 1917 and Edgar should have topped any list for military service. He was smart, fit, and well-trained, valedictorian of his high school graduating class, captain of its cadet corps and leader of its track and debate teams. He even led the school’s cadets marching down Pennsylvania Avenue in Woodrow Wilson’s 1913 inaugural parade. Born and raised in Washington, D.C. in a modest neighborhood near the U.S. Capitol, a few boyhood friends still called him “Speed,” a nickname he earned as a 10-year old when he carried grocery bags for a few nickels for old ladies in the neighborhood. A typical high school report card gave him good grades for English, French, History and Physics, but perfect grades, straight E’s, for Neatness.

His mother raised him Lutheran and he once sang soprano in the church choir, through he switched and joined a Presbyterian church as a teenager, drawn by a charismatic local preacher who organized baseball games and got Edgar to teach Sunday school.

But family duty had squelched any thought of his joining the Army in 1917. That spring, Edgar’s father had been forced by higher-ups to quit his job as a Federal government clerk after 42 years, losing his pension and leaving the family with no income. Earlier, his father had been committed to an asylum in Laurel, Maryland, for chronic depression, what his doctors called “melancholia,” a little-understood, debilitating condition marked by dejection, self-loathing, disinterest in the outside world and suicidal thoughts. Edgar, the youngest of three children, became his parents’ main financial support. So as America went to war in 1917 and he watched school friends ship off to face death in European trenches, Edgar stayed home and used a family tie to win a draft-exempt desk job at the Justice Department.

At Justice, Edgar had engineered a meteoric rise. During the War, he went to work for the newly-formed War Alien Enemy Bureau, responsible for tracking German residents on U.S. soil.

He earned repeated promotions and, after the Armistice, won a spot on the Attorney General’s staff, then another series of promotions in the Department’s Bureau of Investigation. By 1924, Edgar had climbed the ladder to become one of Justice’s top officials.

He had mostly kept his nose clean during Teapot Dome. As the scandals worsened, he avoided them by burying himself in the Bureau’s routine paperwork and a few special cases that caught his eye. By the time the new Attorney General called him in for a talk, he had prepared himself to deliver a perfect pitch. Harlan Stone found Edgar’s conditions very appropriate; in fact, they were exactly what he wanted to hear. “I wouldn’t give [the job] to you under any other conditions,” Stone told him from across the desk. Then, just as abruptly, he ended the conversation. “That’s all. Good day.”

Edgar followed Stone’s lead in executing a catalog of new reforms. He fired scores of incompetents, hacks, and dollar-a-year men, raised standards for new recruits, and directed his agents to stop the political witch hunts and keep the Bureau’s activities “limited strictly to investigations of violations of law,” as Stone put it.<sup>v</sup> In applying the rules, Edgar refused to be bullied by politicians, and Stone consistently backed him. Stone was delighted with his protégé. He praised Edgar as “a man of exceptional intelligence, alertness, and executive ability” who gave “far greater promise than any other man I had heard of.”<sup>vi</sup>

Stone took only seven months to declare his experiment a success. In December 1924, he named Edgar the permanent Director of the Bureau of Investigation, later renamed the FBI.

J. Edgar Hoover would hold the Directorship for forty-eight years, until the day he died in 1972 as the most controversial law enforcement figure of the Twentieth Century. He would achieve mythic status in America, building the FBI into a pillar of government, with over 8,600 agents and a budget of \$336 million. His reorganization of the Bureau in the 1920s under Harlan

Fiske Stone drew wide praise. In the 1930s, he made headlines solving the Lindbergh baby kidnapping case and capturing or killing gangsters like John Dillinger, George “Machine Gun” Kelly, and Lester “Baby Face” Nelson. He introduced scientific crime fighting, an FBI National Academy and Crime Laboratory, Uniform Crime Reports, and a Fingerprint Division whose files by 1974 held a staggering 159 million sets of prints. In the 1940s and 1950s, boys across the country dreamed of growing up to be G-Men, portrayed on screen by movie and television stars like James Cagney, Jimmy Stewart, and Efrem Zimbalist, Jr.

But all these achievements came with a cost. By the 1960s, his abusive probes of leftists, Vietnam War protestors, and Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. made him a figure to be feared. Stories abounded about Hoover’s power, how he could blackmail presidents, senators, and movie stars with voluminous, secret sex files that he kept on so many. Even after death, his legend grew. Congressional probes would reveal decades of FBI abuses: black bag jobs, covert wiretaps, and systematic violations of law. Later biographies cast him in surprising roles, some doubtful, some plausible, from stories of cross-dressing to suggestions of his being one of America’s highest ranking gay men, or the descendant of an African-American ancestor.<sup>vii</sup>

Throughout his life, Edgar never tired of telling the story of how Harlan Stone first asked him to take the job of Director back in May 1924. He made it part of his legend. He required every young FBI recruit for the next fifty years to learn it in basic training. He insisted that every authorized FBI history feature it as an icon. No one ever questioned the story’s truth.

But this too, like most things involving J. Edgar Hoover, had a dark side. The story was based on a lie. In fact, it was Edgar’s favorite kind: the elegant silence of a kept secret. The conception was not immaculate at all. In convincing Harlan Stone to give him the acting job that day in 1924, bright, fresh-faced, earnest young J. Edgar Hoover had cheated the older man.

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Of all the abuses bothering Harlan Fiske Stone on that cool spring day in May 1924 when he decided to choose Edgar as his instrument to reform the tarnished Bureau of Investigation, none rankled him more than the anti-communist crackdowns of 1919 and 1920, already known infamously as the Palmer Raids. They were named for his predecessor, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, once a leading progressive who now lived in sad obscurity in Washington, D.C. But back during his height of power in 1919 and 1920, Palmer had directed Federal agents and local police to go and round up between 5,000 and 10,000 people in a three-month orgy of government bullying. Many were held for months in cramped, filthy, makeshift prisons, beaten, brutalized, railroaded, denied lawyers or access to family members, then released with no explanation, never charged with a crime.

The nation had seemed to go berserk that year, hypnotized by a Red Scare, with Palmer and his circle fanning a paranoid fever against communists, anarchists, radicals, socialists, or anyone not “100 percent American,” as they called it.

Only the outspoken resistance of a handful of lawyers had turned public opinion against the crackdown and saved thousands of innocent people from being deported. Harlan Fiske Stone had been one of these dissenters. At the panic’s height, he had risked his job and reputation to denounce the Red Raids. Stone had submitted public testimony to a Senate investigating committee accusing Palmer and his Justice Department of ignoring constitutional rights, conducting warrantless arrests and searches, and abusing Federal power.<sup>viii</sup>

J. Edgar Hoover had been Palmer’s Special Assistant when the Raids began on November 7, 1919, and he had his fingerprints all over them. Palmer had assigned Edgar to run

the Justice Department’s Radical Division which planned and led the operation. Edgar publicly argued its highest profile legal cases and sat at Palmer’s right hand on Capitol Hill when Palmer testified about the Raids to two different Congressional investigating committees. In internal debates, Edgar consistently argued the most strident views: demanding more arrests, higher bail, fewer rights for detainees, and a tougher line against anyone who stood in the way. Edgar had ordered Bureau agents to compile large dossiers against many of its critics, painting them as Parlor Bolsheviks and Red sympathizers, ammunition to smear them at a moment’s notice. His files covered 450,000 people by 1921, a remarkable feat for the pre-computer age, and they included many of Harlan Stone’s closest personal friends, including lawyers, professors, and even a sitting United States Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis.

None of these facts, though, seemed to reach Harlan Stone in May 1924. Instead, as the new Attorney General, Stone got exactly the opposite impression: that young J. Edgar Hoover had played at most a minor role in the affair. It only made sense: Edgar had been just 24 years old at the time of Palmer’s Raids, just two years out of law school. “[H]e was just a kid, and he always insisted that he was only doing his job,” claimed Ugo Carusi, Harlan Stone’s executive assistant, “and I wouldn’t challenge that, because I can’t imagine policy being made by a fellow in his early twenties.”<sup>ix</sup>

Edgar himself would spend a lifetime denying any major role in the Raids. His FBI publicity machine would blast as a “vicious and false ... smear” that he had led them. Edgar would tell one biographer that he “parted company” with his Justice Department bosses “in the illegal methods and the brutality sometimes employed in rounding up aliens [and was] appalled [by] agents who lacked any knowledge of the rules of evidence and who made arrests which could not stand up in court.”<sup>x</sup> In 1924, he would tell Roger Baldwin, head of the recently formed

American Civil Liberties Union, created in response to the Raids, that he played only an “unwilling part.”<sup>xi</sup>

And Harlan Stone believed it.

To most Americans, it didn't seem to matter. The world had changed quickly since the dark days of 1919. America entered the Roaring Twenties, a happy time of Coolidge prosperity, of jazz, flappers, and speakeasies, Babe Ruth on the diamond, Jack Dempsey in the ring, Al Jolson on Broadway, live ballroom music on the radio, Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish on the silent silver screen, Post Toasties on the breakfast table, F. Scott Fitzgerald on the bookshelf, and Sigmund Freud in the bedroom. Life was good. People had little time to care about communists or other spooks.

But back in 1919, just four years earlier, it had all made perfect sense – the Red Scare, the Raids, the fear. Most thinking, informed Americans agreed: World War I had ended but the country was still fighting, against anarchists and communists at home just as surely as it had fought the Kaiser's Germany in Europe the year before. American soldiers still faced bullets on Russian soil in 1919 and Bolshevism was sweeping the world. Anarchists had exploded bombs in American streets and people had been killed. Radicals had infiltrated labor unions and threatened to topple major industries. The country demanded safety and somebody had to act.

A. Mitchell Palmer and his team had taken responsibility. Had there been excesses? Certainly. But that didn't change the fact. The principal fact was the bombs, and the danger of more bombs, and the duty to protect Americans. Everything else took a back seat.

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- <sup>i</sup> “*He told me brusquely ...*”: Toledano, p. 71. See also Whitehead, p. 67.
- <sup>ii</sup> “*Then he said to me ‘...’*”: Toledano, p. 71. See also Whitehead, p. 67.
- <sup>iii</sup> “*When I became Attorney General, ...*”: Mason, p. 149.
- <sup>iv</sup> “*I don’t know whom to trust; I ...*”: Mason, p. 150.
- <sup>v</sup> “*limited strictly to investigations ...*”: Theoharis, p. 85.
- <sup>vi</sup> “*a man of exceptional ...*”: Mason, p. 152.
- <sup>vii</sup> Hoover’s homosexuality, now part of the accepted legend, has never been established and is doubted by many biographers. The cross-dressing story, unearthed by Anthony Summers in his 1993 biography, has raised particular doubts because it contradicts evidence of Hoover’s extreme discretion and self-discipline; its sourcing has been questioned by, among others, biographers Athan Theoharis and Richard Hack. If Hoover had any gay relationship, it was probably a stable, monogamous, and discreet one with long-time confidante and FBI associate director Clyde Tolson, but this too is unproven. Hoover’s attraction to sex secrets and sex files, though, is well established. The possibility of his having an African-American ancestor, explored by Millie McGhee, is not unlikely given Hoover’s father’s family roots in Virginia and Maryland in the Antebellum South. See Summers p. 254, Theoharis (1995), and Hack, p. 271-274. *African-American ancestor* : See *McGhee, Secrets Uncovered.*
- <sup>viii</sup> *Stone had submitted public testimony*: See Stone testimony, Palmer hearing, 1921, p. 270-280.
- <sup>ix</sup> “[H]e was just a kid...”: Carusi interview in Demaris, p. 57.
- <sup>x</sup> “*vicious and false ...*” “*in the illegal methods...*”: Toledano, p. 60.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Roger Baldwin... “unwilling part”*: Memorandum supplied by L.B. Nichols to Dr. Alpheus Thomas Mason, August 8, 1950, p. 9. NARA, RG 65; File 62-8782.

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