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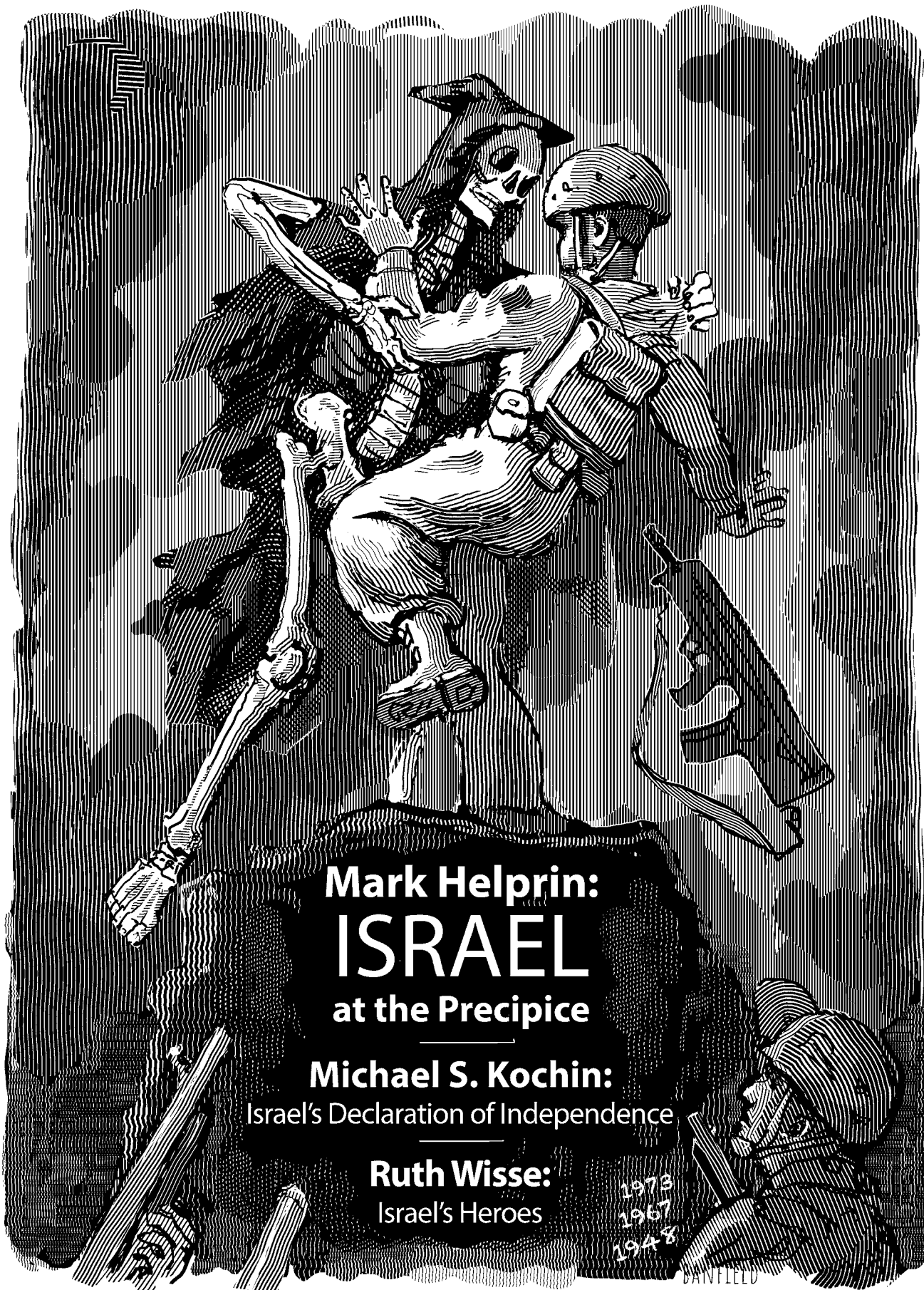
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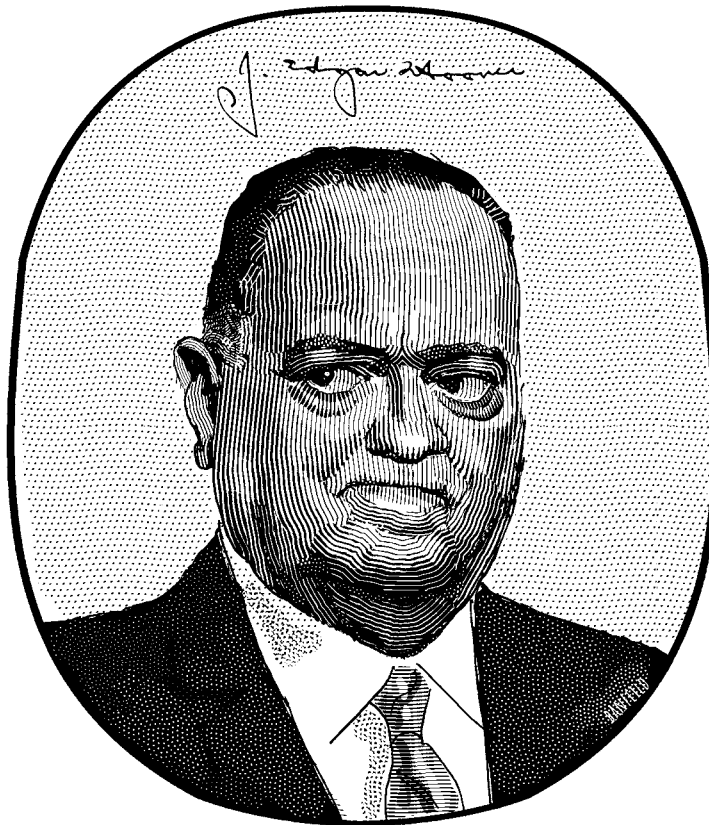
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FIDELITY, BRAVERY, INTEGRITY

G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century, by Beverly Gage.
Viking, 864 pages, \$45 (cloth), \$25 (paper)



A HALF-CENTURY AFTER HIS DEATH IN 1972, there doesn't appear to be anything new to be learned about the life and work of J. Edgar Hoover, the founding organizer and longtime director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and, by any measure, the best-known and most widely admired bureaucrat in American history.

There have been biographies and assorted historical accounts of Hoover in the past 50 years, and journalists have been chronicling him since he first emerged as a public figure in the 1920s. In *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century*, Beverly Gage, the John Lewis Gaddis Professor of History at Yale, delves deeply into, among other things, the impressive variety of neuroses and psychoses that afflicted some of Hoover's family forebears, most especially his depressive father. And since her book is nothing if not characteristic of its time, an inordinate amount of space is devoted to examining the circumstantial evidence of Hoover's sexual life. The wiretap recordings authorized by the FBI of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are embargoed until 2027, but if they should tell us

anything that we don't already know, or think we know, it is likely to be about Dr. King, not Mr. Hoover.

IN SHORT, THERE IS VERY LITTLE TO BE discovered about Hoover in *G-Man* that wasn't examined 30-plus years ago by Richard Gid Powers in *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (1987). Yet whereas Powers endeavored to be fair in his assessments of the private and public Hoover, sticking as closely as possible to what is known absolutely or may be reasonably inferred, Gage tends to judge Hoover in the light of her own opinions on culture and contemporary events and what we might call the received wisdom of our particular epoch. Put another way, *G-Man* is not likely to jeopardize Gage's standing in the Yale History Department, nor is it a particular surprise to learn that it has been awarded this year's Pulitzer Prize for biography, Bancroft Prize in American History, and a shelf of other accolades.

Gage speculates, infers, divines, and concludes in ways that may not necessarily be warranted by the evidence but can be safely

expressed to her chosen audience. This is the establishmentarian version of Hoover, largely expressed in alternating terms of puzzlement, indignation, derision, and occasional sarcasm. It is not for nothing that the rhetoric of *G-Man* has more in common with the narrative flavor of a PBS documentary than the writing of history.

Indeed, the tone can be startling at times. There is a certain snideness in some of the chapter headings—"Little Edgar," "Master of Deceit," "Commies in Colleges," "Nixon's the One"—and her thumbnail sketches are revealingly personal. Calvin Coolidge was "a thin-lipped Massachusetts [*sic*] native...most often described in the negative: dour, silent, inaccessible." Whittaker Chambers "shuffled into the committee room, his clothing unkempt and his gut spilling out over the top of his belt." In his televised debate with John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon "came away a sweaty second-best." By contrast, Thurgood Marshall was "a brilliant young attorney" and Stokely Carmichael "a tall and eloquent Howard University graduate." Dwight D. Eisenhower, who admired and valued the FBI director, at



one point in his presidency “found no more awards to dole out” to Hoover and, after his second White House term, didn’t retire at age 70 so much as find himself “out of power, whiling away the time at his farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.”

There are lapses as well: Gage seems to think that it was the Bolsheviks alone who overthrew the Romanov dynasty, and she misquotes the most famous line (“the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”) in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s First Inaugural Address. In characterizing Hoover’s well-known aversion to Communism, she cites a lengthy memorandum on the subject from the United Auto Workers stalwart Walter Reuther without mentioning Reuther’s extended tenure on the assembly line at a plant in Stalin’s Soviet Union.

NEVERTHELESS, GAGE ENDEAVORS TO give credit where due, albeit grudgingly at times, and dispels an abundance of myths and occasional slanders that have accumulated since Hoover’s demise. She is, for example, duly impressed by the inexorable rise of the 20-something Hoover, born and bred in the lower echelons of the Federal City, to responsibility and power in the Department of Justice. She recognizes Hoover’s mastery of administration, politics, organization, and, in particular, public relations. She admires the high degree to which he applied scientific and technical principles to crime detection, the zeal with which he sought to “professionalize” police work, and the stalwart symbol he became of the federal government’s status as guardian, as well as author and enforcer, of the law.

Gage finds no evidence that Hoover’s extraordinary influence and prestige, especially in Washington, were achieved by blackmail or anything other than talent and adherence to duty. He was considerably more loyal to civil liberties, the principles of due process and equal justice, as well as the letter of the law, than many of the presidents he served or members of Congress who kept him in business. Hoover’s abnormally long tenure as director was achieved not because his political masters feared him but because they depended on him. It was FDR who dramatically expanded the purview of Hoover’s FBI into intelligence and espionage, as well as crime-fighting, and it was Lyndon Johnson

who benefited from Hoover’s longstanding, if little-known, alliances with civil libertarians and civil rights organizations.

To paraphrase the old left-wing adage, some things are true even if J. Edgar Hoover believed them. Martin Luther King, Jr. really did have Communist associates, although Hoover was constrained from revealing how and why he knew. He invariably declined to go where the Constitution stood in his way, and his disdain for Senator Joseph McCarthy was characteristic and genuine. His warnings to the Kennedy brothers about their dangerous liaisons were designed to protect, not intimidate, them. He didn’t fasten onto anti-Communism in order to avoid confronting organized crime; he had been contending with “organized crime”—from Prohibition through racketeering and kidnapping and interstate mayhem—since the Roaring ’20s. He was not a cross-dresser. He fought the Nazis, homegrown and otherwise, as diligently as the Communists, and he argued strenuously against the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Of course, this is not to say that Hoover was as righteous or selfless or indispensable as he believed himself to be, or a model public servant. He was, in certain respects, an immensely peculiar individual, thin-skinned, vindictive, and at times narrow-minded. Yet he could, in his awkward way, be appealing as well: a lonely, sometimes melancholic, often generous and kindly man, evidently tortured by inner conflicts and a rigid self-discipline while zealous to do the right thing. He came to identify the interests of the agency he had built, and his own standing, with the national interest; and his accumulation of political power over a half-century yielded an imbalance in the federal machinery that remains unsettled. It is impossible to know what Hoover would have made of Donald Trump, but it is safe to assume that he would have been astonished by the FBI’s misconduct in the 2016 Trump campaign and subsequent presidency.

TO THAT END, THE BESETTING WEAKNESS of *G-Man* is Beverly Gage’s ascription of motives: on the basis of disjointed evidence and recurrent leaps of logic, she presumes to know what made Hoover tick, and why. She seems especially preoccupied

with his youthful membership in the Kappa Alpha fraternity, whose Southern roots and customs were probably less influential in subsequent decades than the times (and the place, Washington, D.C.) in which Hoover lived his long life. The questions surrounding his sexual orientation are surely tantalizing, but we can know very little with certainty and historians should refrain from facile conclusions. “Racism” is recurrently invoked as an explanation for Hoover’s actions when it can neither be demonstrated nor even reasonably surmised.

The one argument about Hoover on which most readers will agree is, undoubtedly, his longevity at the FBI. Forty-eight years is a perilously long time to exercise the kind of authority Hoover enjoyed until his death at age 77. There were one or two opportune moments, especially during the Johnson Administration, when he would have been well advised to step down, while his public esteem remained uncommonly high and his great work had largely been done. But LBJ waived the rule for federal retirement and Hoover was pleased to hang on.

The problem of long-serving public officials clinging to power indefinitely is not a new problem, nor is Hoover the latest specimen: Admiral Hyman Rickover and Dr. Anthony Fauci offer two more recent, and equally instructive, examples. The startling thing about Hoover is that, despite his cultural status in later years as a consummate square and the butt of sophisticated humor, he remained im pregnably popular with the American public. The one president who sought to induce him to retire (Nixon) lost his nerve on innumerable occasions.

In 1964, the novelist John O’Hara wrote a weekly newspaper column in which he declared, at the outset, that “it’s time the Lawrence Welk people had their say... When the country is in trouble...it is the Lawrence Welk people who can be depended upon, all the way.” It has been J. Edgar Hoover’s misfortune that, in his lifetime, the Lawrence Welk people thought highly of him, and probably still do, but that very few academic historians are Lawrence Welk people.

Philip Terzian is the author of Architects of Power: Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and the American Century (Encounter Books).

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