

# H-Net Reviews

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Douglas M. Charles. *The FBI's Obscene File: J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau's Crusade against Smut*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012. x + 171 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1825-5.

Reviewed by Craig Loftin (Fullerton)

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## J. Edgar Hoover's Smutty Obsession

In this engaging, readable, and slender volume (140 pages of text), Douglas M. Charles chronicles the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) efforts to monitor obscenity as well as the FBI's influential role in shaping public opinion and policies related to obscenity. Building off the research of FBI scholars, such as Athan Theoharis, and obscenity scholars, such as Paul Boyer, Charles convincingly highlights the important yet overlooked role played by the FBI in social, cultural, and political debates about obscenity throughout the twentieth century. Learning about the FBI's obsessive antiobscenity crusade greatly enhances our understanding of how the bureau functioned and its impact on American life.

The FBI began collecting obscene materials in the 1920s, but it was during World War II that "FBI officials would make obscenity, pornography, and the politics of morality one of their primary concerns" (p. 1). Much of the FBI's interest in obscenity came from long-time bureau director J. Edgar Hoover's personal preoccupation with the issue ("Hoover had always been fascinated by pornography," one of his associates noted [p. 88]) and Hoover's deeply held belief that a wide range of social problems, including juvenile delinquency and racial tension, could be blamed on the growing proliferation of published material that he believed to be obscene. But Hoover was never alone in this crusade. Morality guardians, censorship activists, and politicians willing to exploit the issue (such as Richard Nixon) bolstered Hoover's efforts, encouraging the FBI to expand its monitoring of obscenity and to generously share its data with local law enforcement agencies. Hoover's influential position and quasi-celebrity status provided him with an important public platform to advocate against obscenity, and he had many vocal supporters cheering him on throughout his career.

Charles's archival sources center on the FBI's "Obscene File," a centralized depository of pornographic

comic books, raunchy phonograph records, and sexually explicit playing cards that bureau agents had collected and filed away over many decades. Unfortunately, the Obscene File was destroyed in the 1990s, but Charles makes excellent use of an administrative file that reveals a bounty of information about the Obscene File and the ways Hoover and his agents used its information. From this administrative file, Charles gleans several fascinating episodes in the FBI's crusade against obscenity. FBI targets included African American blues musicians, the Kinsey Institute, 1950s-era gay rights organizations, comedians Abbott and Costello (both major pornography connoisseurs), and Andy Warhol. Even the song "Louie Louie" became the subject of an investigation. These cases are the heart of the book and make for fascinating reading.

Obscenity prosecutions that were derived from the FBI's Obscene File peaked in 1952. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Earl Warren Supreme Court issued a series of rulings liberalizing legal definitions of obscenity, undercutting the FBI's efforts to monitor and prosecute obscenity. Charles illustrates such growing legal ambiguities in the case of *ONE* magazine, the country's first openly homosexual magazine. *ONE* was seized by Los Angeles postal authorities (with FBI encouragement) on obscenity grounds in 1954. FBI agents, however, backed off investigating *ONE* further while lawyers for the magazine challenged the seizure through a lengthy appeals process. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1958 that *ONE* was not obscene, the FBI lost its legal grounding against the organization and dropped its interest in *ONE* as well as other early gay rights groups. Charles notes, "the constantly changing legal definition of obscenity after 1957 was a serious problem for FBI officials" (p. 61). This was especially true during the late 1960s and early 1970s when adult pornography became increasingly legal and, in the case of films like *Deep Throat* (1972), even

mainstream.

This changing legal climate combined with Hoover's death in 1972 made obscenity less of a priority for the FBI in the late 1970s and 1980s, but the bureau still found the Obscene File useful for the purpose of targeting and prosecuting organized crime syndicates, many of which had a hand in the newly legal adult pornography industry. In these cases, obscenity itself was no longer the target, but merely a means to bring about prosecutions in other areas, such as drugs or prostitution. Charles's descriptions of these undercover operations are quite detailed and a major strength of the book.

In short, *The FBI's Obscene File* provides a useful and concise overview of the important points of intersection

between the history of the FBI and the history of obscenity in the United States. His later chapters suggest that, despite the discontinuation of the Obscenity File, the issue of obscenity has hardly lost its political relevancy. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales in fact tried to revive "adult obscenity" prosecutions as recently as 2005 through the creation of a special task force (one FBI agent commented that "the guys I had worked with, they all thought it was a big joke" [p. 131]). Despite the legalization and unprecedented availability of adult pornography, and probably *because* of this legalization and availability, certain politicians (most recently Rick Santorum) are still quick to blame pornography for a host of social ills in American society, much as Hoover did for nearly fifty years.

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