For over a hundred years, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has been one of the most prominent criminal investigation organizations, but what about the people behind the scenes at the FBI? Stephen M. Underhill, an associate professor of communication at Marshall University in West Virginia, guides readers through the career of J. Edgar Hoover, the first director of the FBI in his book *The Manufacture of Consent: J. Edgar Hoover and the Rhetorical Rise of the FBI*. Although Hoover was not an elected official, he achieved great power and had a major influence on public opinion through propaganda. Adopting some of the tactics formerly used by President Woodrow Wilson and the Committee on Public Information during World War I, Hoover engaged in the manufacture of consent to a degree to which few people were aware. His successes in this project explain much of his, and the FBI’s, rise to prominence and his ability to hold so much power for such an extended period of time. The manufacture of consent is a propaganda term originally linked to Walter Lippmann, about using different forms of media and other channels to manage public opinion since public opinion is a force of its own that, if not directed correctly, could cause problems.

Underhill organizes the book around five major aspects of Hoover's career detailed in the preface and book's chapter structure. First is Hoover's use of Anglo-American nationalism to promote the FBI to the average American citizen. Second is Hoover's adaption of his own persona to accord with widely accepted ideas of American manhood, branding himself as a white Anglo-Saxon heterosexual Protestant man, which was not an accurate representation of his true identity. The third is the idea of Hoover being a leader who constructed his image to fit his rhetorical image. The fourth is Hoover's use of the new concept of red fascism, which equates to Stalinism and focuses on nationalism, propaganda, and anticommunism tenets. Hoover aimed to associate the FBI with the broadly popular anticommunist rhetoric already present in the political culture. In the face of Americanism and the New Deal, Hoover constrained his own speech to fit with the complex that he had created of himself, which contrasted these ideals. Finally, the fifth consideration is how the FBI broke away from the constitutional system that the government had in place and created their own democratic legitimacy with the people versus having a cultural hierarchy. As a reader, I found that these themes helped create an organized train of thought throughout the book and connect the elements of Hoover's life and policy-making.
Underhill divides the book into four chapters that align with four different stages of Hoover's life and career. Chapter 1 represents Hoover's life from his birth in 1895 until 1932 and discusses Hoover's rise to power by 1932 and the development of his personal views during these formative years. Chapter 2 represents the period 1933 to 1938, during which Hoover led the "war on crime" into World War II. Hoover joined the Department of Justice during World War I, quickly climbing the ranks, and became involved in politics. Many of the politicians that Hoover associated with were heavily nationalistic in their policies and every day practices, which also shaped Hoover's rhetoric and became a defining characteristic of his practice throughout his career. One of Hoover's major innovations was something Woodrow Wilson and the Committee on Public Information had tried during World War I: getting the public to think in the way that Hoover and others want them to think using propaganda as a guiding hand—the manufacture of consent referenced in the book's title.

Chapter 3 covers 1939 to 1945. By this point, Hoover had created a robust public image and a wide following. During World War II, Hoover worked to keep the FBI at the center of attention. For example, he worked with other government agencies to place billboards across cities, such as Boston, to remind people that careless talk about American military plans or operations would betray the nation's secrets and delay American victory. For Hoover, these tactics reminded the public of the FBI's power and how central the agency was to the war effort. This was part of the more general rhetorical effort to create fear of the "fifth column," a hidden threat to the nation that undermined the war effort through subversion and espionage. Strategically involving the public in a counterespionage effort, Hoover further cemented his and the FBI's central position in American life. Finally, chapter 4 covers 1946 to 1953 and the shift from World War II into the Cold War. Again, Hoover was essential to the rhetorical re-framing of the threat as it shifted from Germany to the Soviet Union and domestic communism. For Hoover and the FBI, it was a simple matter to switch from wartime investigation of potential spies and saboteurs to, for example, hunting for evidence of espionage in government offices like the State Department. Most of this was unfounded conspiracy thinking, but with Hoover's platform and the more general anticommunist atmosphere of the time, Hoover's efforts were persuasive and did much to set the stage for McCarthyism and the Red Scare.

One example of Hoover's skillful use of media to influence public opinion was his involvement with Hollywood. For example, Hoover worked with movie production studios like Warner Brothers to create crime movies that could be used as propaganda tools. These films took flight during the gangster era and centered on a crime narrative that was heavily dramatized and romanticized to make it enjoyable to the general public. The FBI supported these films, which helped push the idea that it was the viewer's national duty to help fight crime, creating a sense of drama surrounding crime in general, making the public want to be included. Hoover was still heavily entangled in the Hollywood scene, creating crime movies and being involved in documentaries. The films always pushed the idea that these stories were real-life dramas, and if Americans were not careful, what happened in the movie could happen to them. Though Hoover remained at the FBI long after 1953, most of his major innovations had taken place by this time.

Hoover will not be forgotten any time soon. As Underhill notes in his conclusion, over twenty years later, in 1968, Richard Nixon ran for president with a campaign slogan of "Make America First Again." Ronald Reagan used the slogan "Make America Great Again" in 1980 in his presidential campaign. In 2016, Donald Trump repeated Reagan's slogan of "Make America Great Again," which became "Keep America Great" in 2020.
These slogans all had their own unique historical context but originated from Hoover and people like him. It is eighty years later, and the use of Hoover's rhetoric of American nationalism has not died down. Underhill does not necessarily convince readers that Hoover was the all-time master of manipulating public opinion, but he succeeds in explaining how Hoover was extremely good at building his authority and unifying public opinion through propaganda. People consumed these popular culture products for their entertainment value and unconsciously absorbed the underlying ideas. Hoover took advantage of the tensions at this time and his rhetoric helped to shape the rhetorical landscape in America for years to come.

In closing, Underhill has done a fantastic job seamlessly connecting the life of J. Edgar Hoover to the present. He shows Hoover's impact during his lifetime and how his techniques are still evident in politics and entertainment today. The five aspects of Hoover's career laid out early in the book are carried throughout, allowing the reader to keep them consistently in mind.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55971

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.