



0. HOOVER and the FLEDGLING BUREAU - Story
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This photo, of J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972), was taken on December 22, 1924. It shows him at his desk, pen in hand, at the age of twenty-nine. At the time, Hoover had just been appointed director of a small government agency called the Bureau of Investigation (which ultimately became the Federal Bureau of Investigation). Image online via the FBI.

John Dillinger was first called "Public Enemy Number One" by J. Edgar Hoover. Then in charge of a small federal-government agency known merely as the Bureau of Investigation, Hoover had been looking for a way to make himself, and his men, significant.

Before he could create an organization worthy of respect, however, Hoover had to deal with the reality of his situation. He was running an agency known for its incompetency and corruption. Even his second-in-command, Harold ("Pop") Nathan, knew how bad things were. In 1932, he sent Hoover a memo containing these observations:

I believe that the trouble with many of our offices is that our Agents in Charge are somewhat foggy mentally. Or at any rate they function slowly along mental lines.

Young men with law degrees, who wore suits and hats but weren't allowed to carry guns, had to be transformed into expert crime fighters. Behind the scene, they had to master the latest scientific techniques (like wire-tapping and fingerprinting). On the street, Hoover's new "G-men" had to expertly fire a weapon. How else could they combat the deadly aim of criminals with Tommy guns?

Hoover, who rose to power in Washington while he was relatively young, had a plan:

- He would transform his fledgling bureau into a national crime-fighting organization employing the best men and the best techniques.
- He would demand absolute loyalty and discipline. (He was known to fire people who arrived at work one-minute late.)
- And he would add hardened, experienced crime fighters (mostly from the South) to take charge of key investigations.

By 1933, an article in *Collier's Weekly* noted his progress as Hoover converted the Bureau of Investigation into a "personal and political machine." How did he do it?

More inaccessible than presidents, he kept his agents in fear and awe by firing and shifting them at whim; no other government agency had such a turnover of personnel.

Hoover himself, at the time, had to acknowledge that he'd never made an arrest or fired a gun in anger. He did write memos - lots of them - and let his displeasure be known whenever he disliked something.

As for his personal appearance, ego and means of transportation, the August 19, 1933 *Collier's* article

(authored by Ray Tucker, the magazine's Washington bureau chief) continues:

The director's appetite for publicity is the talk of the Capital, although admittedly a peculiar enterprise for a bureau which, by the nature of its work, is supposed to operate in secrecy. Although Mr. Hoover issued strict orders against publicity on the part of his agents, he was never bound by them.

In appearance, Mr. Hoover looks utterly unlike the story-book sleuth. He is short, fat, businesslike, and walks with a mincing step ... He dresses fastidiously, with Eleanor blue as the favorite color for the matched shades of tie, handkerchief and socks ... A little pompous, he rides in a limousine even if only to a nearby self-service cafeteria.

By early 1934, Hoover was still enduring a major problem in his effort to gain fame for himself and his bureau. During the Great Crime Wave, he and his men were forced to remain on the sidelines, leaving the work of capturing bank robbers to local police forces. (A bank robbery, then, was not a national crime.)

In March of 1934, however, John Dillinger made a fatal mistake. He stole a car and drove it across state lines. A federal offense, it was just what Hoover needed to catapult his agency into the nation's consciousness.

Three days after the jail break, Hoover called Melvin Purvis - the Special-Agent-in-Charge of the Bureau's Chicago office. (These PDF links are part of the FBI's files on Purvis.) The director (as Hoover liked to be called) had specific orders for Purvis:

Get Dillinger!

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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Media Stream



Melvin Purvis

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

Information on Purvis obtained from his online FBI file.

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Thompson Submachine Guns - Story of the Tommy Guns

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