



Former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in his office on April 5, 1940.

Library of Congress

The man who knew all the secrets

As director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for nearly half a century, J. Edgar Hoover was respected, feared and reviled perhaps more than any other man in Washington, D.C.

Although several books have been written about Hoover, including books by his assistant directors, no one from Hoover's own office has ever spilled the beans about their boss — until now.

Paul Letersky was 22 years old and a fledgling FBI employee when he was assigned to clerk on the director's personal staff. For the next two years, he served at the demanding beck and call of Hoover and his loyal personal secretary, Helen Gandy.

After that unique trial by fire, Letersky went on to become an FBI special agent, but stayed in touch with his former colleagues in the director's office.

Now retired and living in Nehalem, Letersky — with the help of co-author Gordon Dillow — shares what it was like to work just steps away from Hoover's inner sanctum.

Letersky confessed that a few years before he found himself in that position, he'd simply been seeking a way to pay for law school. That's when he fell into conversation with an FBI recruiter. Back then, the bureau had exacting requirements for potential hires: candidates had to be male, have a college degree and an assertive personality. And, as missives from FBI headquarters frequently admonished, "long-hairs, beards, pear-shaped heads... etc." need not apply.

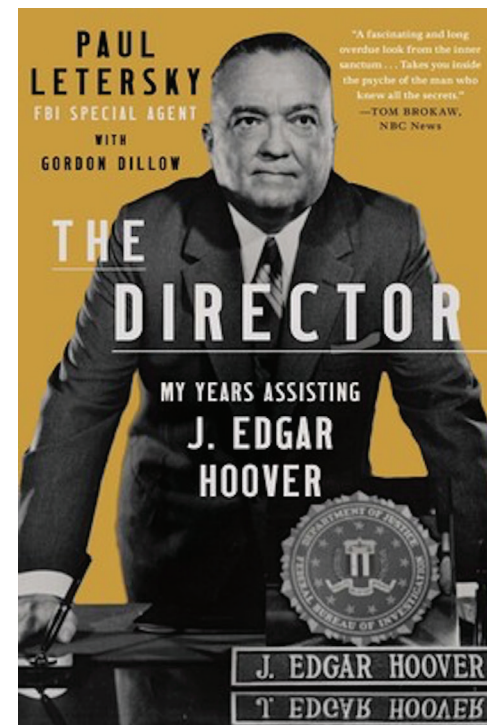
"(A)pparently my cranial conformation wasn't disqualifying," the author notes wryly. He took the job as a bit of a lark.

Letersky does a fine job of describing that era, a time when social mores were rapidly evolving from conventional to anti-establishment. But up on the fifth floor of the FBI headquarters, Hoover was determined to hold strong against what he called the "kooks, misfits, drunks and slobs." He regarded these as an existential threat to the American way of life, and he wasn't going to let it happen on his watch.

The FBI's resulting COINTELPRO program was a widespread undercover operation aimed at infiltrating and disrupting all kinds of domestic political dissent — and, ultimately, it was an illegal assault on fundamental First Amendment rights.

Hoover also amassed files on all sorts of political figures and celebrities that detailed everything from their business liaisons to their sexual partners.

Letersky notes that his boss used this



The cover of 'The Director,' a book by retired FBI employee Paul Letersky, who now lives in Nehalem.

This week's book

'The Director,' by Paul Letersky, with Gordon Dillow

Scribner — 320 pp — \$28

information to ensure his own power — the director was never a political hack for any of the eight presidents he worked for during the course of his long career.

Rejecting the more salacious claims about Hoover — that he was a cross-dresser, for example — the author does share plentiful insights about his boss's meticulously guarded routine, his opinionated outbursts and his occasional meting-out of kindness.

This book is filled with interesting anecdotes and several extensive conversations. (Regarding the latter, some readers may wonder at Letersky's capacity to recall those long-ago conversations in such detail, but this is never explained.)

"The Director" is a fascinating, eminently readable account of the man who shaped America's primary law enforcement agency.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaraLMcM@gmail.com

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