

# The Unknown Side of J. Edgar Hoover

*You know him as a bulldog-like gang buster and spy hunter, but behind this grim facade is the quiet peace born of unwavering faith*

By CURTIS MITCHELL

**A** SQUARE-JAWED, unsmiling man walks down the aisle of Washington's National Presbyterian Church each Sunday morning at precisely 9 o'clock. He is rarely late. He is always in the same pew, quietly worshipping among many Capital dignitaries.

History lives in the time-stained sanctuary where this bulldog-like man finds peace from his usual demanding routine. To the right of the pulpit is the famous President's pew, brought here from the old First Presbyterian Church that was started in a toolshed behind the White House. Presidents Jackson, Polk, Pierce, Buchanan, and Cleveland were members of the congregation.

Ulysses S. Grant sat in Pew 32, on the left aisle. Pew 41, left of the center aisle, is reserved for President and Mrs. Eisenhower. Not far away on the left side is the pew of the square-jawed worshiper, J. Edgar Hoover.

Dr. Edward Elson, famous as the President's pastor, begins to preach. Hoover listens intently, as if afraid some phrase might escape him, and his manner seems to soften. Here, in God's house, in the same congregation he first joined as a boy in knee-pants, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation is truly at home.

Of all those worshipers with him at the early Sunday service, only a few know of how he nearly became a divinity student instead of a lawyer; or of how surely, knowing his character and capacity, had he taken that step, he himself would be preaching in that famous Presbyterian pulpit today.

The long tussle between the cross and the badge began for John Edgar Hoover after the turn of the century on a Sunday evening in the modest Washington home of his father, Dickerson Hoover, superintendent of printing and engraving for a Government agency. On that evening, the first of many, an old man with a great, white beard came to supper. He was John Hitz, the first Swiss minister to the United States, a robust Calvinist, and J. Edgar's great-uncle on his mothers' side.

After supper, Uncle John led the family in a period of solemn Bible reading. The faithful already had attended Sunday school and one preaching session. At the end of the reading, everyone knelt to pray. It was a tableau common to many communities of that period, and repeated often in the devout Hoover household.

**A** NNIE HOOVER, stern and God-fearing, was indomitably ambitious for her four children. Each Sunday, in preparation for Sunday school, she scrubbed John Edgar's ears, combed his hair, and rehearsed him in the Bible verses he was required to memorize. He was a bright child. One winter, he learned so many Scriptural passages that the church awarded him a New Testament. Well-thumbed and frayed, it is a treasure in his library today.

Young Edgar also served as a choirboy. His fresh soprano was good enough for both chorus and solo work. Old programs, if you were to search them out, show a variety of social and religious events at which he was the Christmas and Easter soloist. This continued until his voice changed.

His real enthusiasm, however, was Sunday school. And his closest friend and advisor was the pastor of the old First Presbyterian Church, Dr. Donald C. MacLeod. Hoover recalls, "If ministers were like Doctor MacLeod, I wanted to be one."

MacLeod romped with his young charges, played baseball in the park with them, and carefully fanned the precious fire he thought he detected in young Hoover. He became John Edgar's personal and spiritual advisor.

Inevitably, opportunity opened before the eager youth. "We want you to teach a class of boys in our Sunday school," Doctor MacLeod said. "How about it? You'd be fine for the boys."

"I don't know anything about teaching," Hoover replied hesitantly.

"We'll help you."

His class grew with his skill and his passion for

detail, and eventually he became Sunday-school superintendent.

"For a number of years," says Doctor Elson, his pastor today, "many people thought that J. Edgar Hoover was headed for the Gospel ministry."

Why he turned toward legal training is a mystery, even to Hoover. Today, he says, "I really don't know why I chose law. You come to a crossroads, and you've got to go one way or the other. I was torn, but there was never any figuring out the advantage of one against the other. We had no lawyers in our family, and I don't recall that I knew any. But suddenly I took the turn and knew that's what I wanted to be—an attorney."

The "turn" took place in 1913 when he was graduated from high school as class valedictorian. Doctor MacLeod had accepted another pastorate and left Washington. Perhaps his absence made the critical difference. Perhaps young John Edgar felt that he could make his forthright Christianity more effective as a layman. At any rate, he got a job that autumn as a messenger at the Library of Congress and entered the night classes of George Washington Law School. Working by day, studying by night, he won his master's degree in law four years later and moved into the Department of Justice at \$990 per year. He has never worked for any other employer.

Through the years, he has made it clear that, though he would never wear the cloth, his mind would never change its religious bent. He is sure that a basic cause of the crime he fights is lack of family religion.

"The criminal is the product of spiritual starvation," he says. "Someone failed miserably to bring him to know God, love, and serve Him. The Sunday school teaches the child to 'rule his spirit' and to place a reliance on God which will not be shaken."

**H** E GOT his chance to practice his principles in 1924. He was just 29 years old when Harlan Fiske Stone, the nation's attorney general assigned to clean up the mess of the Harding regime, summoned Hoover to his office.

"Sit down, Mr. Hoover," the stern New Englander said. The two men measured each other, the Puritan and the Presbyterian. Stone said, "Young man, I want you to become acting head of the Bureau of Investigation."

Everyone knew that the Bureau was loaded with incompetents and crooks. Efforts to fire some of them had failed because of high-level protection. "I'll take it on certain conditions," Hoover replied.

"What are they?"

"The Bureau must be divorced from politics and not be a catchall for political hacks. Appointments must be made on merit, promotions on proved ability. Finally, the Bureau must be responsible only to the Attorney General himself, only to you, sir."

The young lawyer's eyes did not flicker under the fierce gaze of the old barrister. Finally, Stone said,



Hoover's early decision to work in government instead of the ministry is reflected as President confers Gold

Medal for Distinguished Federal Service on FBI Director (Eisenhower's right) and four other officials.