

MASTER OF DECEIT

J. Edgar Hoover
and America in
the Age of Lies

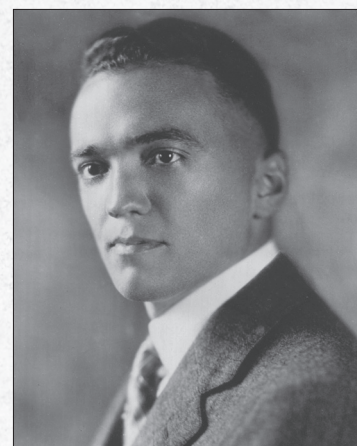
by

MARC ARONSON

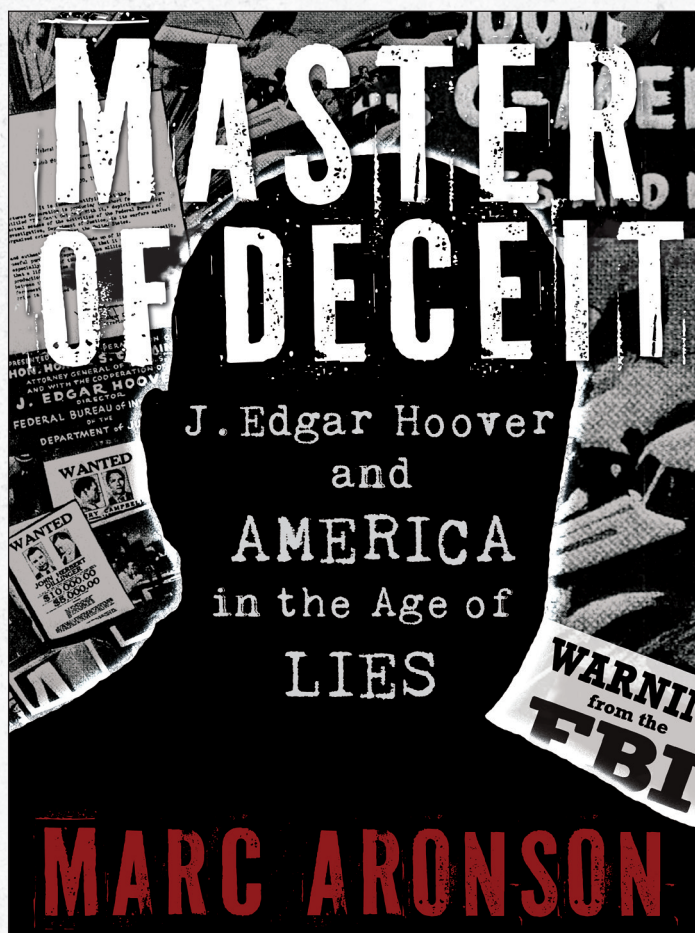
ABOUT THE BOOK

“King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. . . . You better take it before your filthy, abnormal, fraudulent self is bared to the nation.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. received this demand in an anonymous letter in 1964. He believed that the letter was telling him to commit suicide. Who



Hoover at twenty-four—a handsome young man working his way up in government



wrote this anonymous letter? The FBI. And the man behind it all was J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI's first director. In this unsparing exploration of one of the most powerful Americans of the twentieth century, accomplished historian Marc Aronson unmask the man behind the Bureau—his tangled family history and personal relationships; his own need for secrecy, deceit, and control; and the broad trends in American society that shaped his world. Hoover may have given America the security it wanted, but the secrets he knew gave him—and the Bureau—all the power he wanted.

Using photographs, cartoons, movie posters, and FBI transcripts, *Master of Deceit* presents readers with a variety of print media to negotiate and use to understand Hoover's motives and the political climate of the United States in the twentieth century. Aronson's balanced writing and meticulous research provide readers with the necessary evidence to draw their own conclusions as to whether or not Hoover's methods were justified.

This discussion guide encourages readers' critical thinking skills about the balance that must be struck by a government between providing security and upholding the constitutional rights of its citizens. The questions here could be used to promote class discussion or as writing prompts

A teachers' guide is also available.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before reading:

1. Introduce this quote from Benjamin Franklin:
“They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” Ask students if they agree or disagree. Ask which freedoms they give up while in school. Have a discussion about when, if ever, it would be appropriate to give up certain liberties. What liberties would they be willing to surrender?
2. Ask the students to rank the following freedoms from the First Amendment to the Constitution by their importance:
 - Freedom of religion
 - Freedom of speech
 - Freedom of the press
 - The right to peacefully assemble
 - The right to petition the government for change

While reading:

1. Ask students to discuss the title of part 1: “Nothing in This Book Matters Until You Care About Communism.” What are the basic tenets of Communism? And why was Communism perceived as a threat to the United States?
2. In the prologue, which discusses the FBI plan to blackmail Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the author writes: “It was the product of a time when a branch of the government—our government—believed that its mission to defend against revolutionaries was more important than any law” (p. ix). Do you think the American people would ever rise up against their government? What types of things would the government have to do for you to join a revolution to topple the government?
3. “There are two ways to tell the story of America,” the author claims, and he goes on to describe each version (p. 4). Have students read these two paragraphs and decide which version they most agree with.
4. If revolution is, as the author says, “bred in the bones of America” (p. 9), then why have people like J. Edgar Hoover gone to such extremes to suppress revolutionary thought, speech, and action in the course of American history?
5. What challenges did Hoover overcome in his childhood and youth, and how did they shape his personality and leadership style?
6. How would you describe the relationship between Hoover and his mother? How did it compare to his relationship with his father?
7. What talents did Hoover exhibit in his work in the Library of Congress that served him well in the FBI?
8. On page 18, Aronson writes of the bombing of Attorney General Palmer’s house. How do you think this bombing affected Hoover’s perception of a Communist threat in the U.S.?
9. In the Palmer dragnet, thousands of immigrants were rounded up and detained in federal custody. What was Palmer’s justification for this action? During World War II, thousands of Japanese Americans were placed in internment camps for the duration of the war. Was this justified? Since September 11, 2001, many Muslims have also been detained. Is this justified? Why or why not?
10. How did Hoover’s official version of the pursuit of John Dillinger differ from reality? Why did Hoover engage in these tactics?
11. Name three ways Hoover tried to discredit Melvin Purvis’s efforts. Why did Hoover do this?
12. In what ways did Hoover create the Bureau “in his image of America and American values” (p. 40)? Do you think the Bureau reflected the American values of liberty and freedom?
13. Read the paragraph beginning “Hoover mistrusted everything” at the bottom of page 70 and the one that follows it. What evidence is there that Hoover was racist? What reasons does the author suggest are behind Hoover’s adamant opposition to civil rights for African Americans?

14. On page 85, Aronson writes of the “secret conversation” between Hoover and President Roosevelt. Was it good or bad that Roosevelt was given such broad power to “protect the nation”? Justify your answer.
15. Aronson writes of “black bag” operations used by the FBI (p. 89). What were these operations? Were they legal? Justified? Useful?
16. Was it legal for Hoover to create files labeled “Do Not File” (p. 89)? Why did he create these files? Are there ever times when the government should be able to keep secret files? The following link is to an article in the *New York Times* detailing the federal government’s request for scientists not to publish data on the highly contagious H5N1 bird flu: <http://tinyurl.com/6t4kntd>. Do you think the government should have the right to hide scientific research conducted by non-government scientists? Why or why not?
17. What was the “false premise” (p. 141) that was used to fire people during the Age of Fear? Is it appropriate for the government to gather information on people’s sexual orientation? Why or why not?
18. Do you think that people are more or less accepting of homosexuality today than they were in the 1950s? Cite examples to justify your answer.
19. Discuss some specific ways in which Hoover helped Senator McCarthy in his anti-Communist crusade.
20. Aronson writes: “Bullies fight dirty; they want their victims to look weak and foolish. That was McCarthy’s gift: he was so unscrupulous, so determined to win, that he simply ignored any rules of fairness or even logic” (p. 123). Give two examples of how McCarthy was unfair in his accusations.
21. In the 1950s, there were strong anti-Communist sentiments in the U.S. Today there are similar anti-Muslim sentiments. How have Muslims been treated differently in the U.S. since September 11, 2001?
22. What was COINTELPRO, and how was it “Hoover’s triumph and his final fall” (p. 162)?
23. Name two positive effects of Hoover’s time in the FBI. What was the worst thing he did as director?
24. How have Facebook and other social media changed the way people get information? Do you think Twitter, Facebook, and other social media have improved individuals’ freedom in the world? Justify your answer with examples.
25. In the epilogue, Aronson writes: “America was the first nation in the world to oppose torture and has signed many international treaties spelling out the rights of our enemies” (p. 194). Since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, however, the United States has engaged in practices violating these treaties. Prisoners have been subjected to “enhanced interrogation techniques,” such as waterboarding. The Central Intelligence Agency has engaged in “extraordinary rendition,” the abduction and illegal transfer of a person from one nation to another for the purpose of indefinite confinement and torture. Are these actions justifiable because we are fighting a “war on terror”?
26. Is there a time when torture is justified? Consider this example: A person is taken into custody after he or she has planted an explosive that has not yet detonated. Would it be justified, in order to save the lives of many people, to torture that individual to find the location of the bomb? Do you think torture results in reliable information?

POST-READING ACTIVITY

Many historical events and figures are mentioned in the book. Have students work in pairs using print and electronic resources to research one of the following topics: the Black Panthers, John Dillinger, Marcus Garvey, Howard Fast, Alger Hiss, the Lindbergh kidnapping,

Louis Post, John Reed, Paul Robeson, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Scottsboro trials, Margaret Chase Smith, Watergate, or Walter Winchell. Have students share their findings with the class through a PowerPoint or other presentation.



Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division

Ten Hollywood writers, producers, and directors, including the screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, refused to answer HUAC's questions about their Communist pasts and were sent to prison for contempt of Congress. Afterward, they were blacklisted—unable to get work in Hollywood, at least at their old pay rates and under their real names. Trumbo moved to Mexico.

ABOUT MARC ARONSON

Marc Aronson has a doctorate in American history and is a member of the graduate faculty in the library school at Rutgers. He is an editor and author of many award-winning books for young people, including *Sir Walter Raleigh and the Quest for El Dorado*; *War Is . . . Soldiers, Survivors, and Storytellers Talk About War*, which he co-edited with Patty Campbell; and most recently, *Trapped: How the World Rescued 33 Miners from 2,000 Feet Below the Chilean Desert*. Marc Aronson lives in New Jersey.

ALSO BY MARC ARONSON

Pick-Up Game: A Full Day of Full Court
co-edited with Charles R. Smith Jr.

*War Is . . . Soldiers, Survivors,
and Storytellers Talk About War*
co-edited with Patty Campbell

*This guide was written by Edward T. Sullivan, a librarian
and writer who lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.*



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