

# Clint Eastwood's Dishonest 'J. Edgar'

**Exclusive:** In the movie *J. Edgar*, director Clint Eastwood glosses over the long train of abuses committed by the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover so there's more time for a psychological profile. But James DiEugenio says that leaves a dishonest impression of this violator of American rights.

By James DiEugenio

Much of the controversy around Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar* has swirled around screenwriter Lance Black's depiction of the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover as a closeted gay man, since Black is a gay writer-director and most of his previous projects featured gay themes.

But even more important in any critical analysis of the movie is Eastwood's work as director. Because that informs us about why the American film business has come to a point when a mediocre, compromised and dishonest production like this much ballyhooed film gets praised for "being candid" about one of the worst Americans of the 20th Century.

To my knowledge, this is the third film made about J. Edgar Hoover. In 1977, there was a rather low budget, independent film directed and written by Larry Cohen, which starred Broderick Crawford as Hoover. It was titled *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover*. Considering its time period, it was a forthright look at Hoover. Because of its controversial topic, it was plagued by budget problems. Therefore it was made on the run by sneaking onto locations.

In 1987, Robert Collins wrote and directed a TV film, which starred Treat Williams as Hoover. This film was less forthright about Hoover and his crimes. (I should note, there is also a third production that cannot really be called a movie. It was more like a one-man theatrical show with Ernest Borgnine enacting the Director and Cartha DeLoach, a senior FBI official under Hoover, providing the support. With Hoover's No. 3 man on board, one can imagine the depth of insight into Hoover.)

The fact that Hoover has been dead since 1972, yet there has been so little produced on film about him tells us something about the man and the film business in the USA. For there can be little doubt that J. Edgar Hoover was one of the most perniciously influential men in 20th Century America.

While helming the Bureau, he conducted some of the greatest abuses of power and legal transgressions that any American civil servant ever did. And while he did so, he protected himself by collecting pieces of personal blackmail against

federal, state and local politicians and government officers.

In one famous case cited by author Curt Gentry, Hoover managed to secure film of a prominent citizen's wife fellating her black chauffeur. When these kinds of things did not exist, Hoover would have FBI employees invent the evidence to execute the blackmail.

A good example of this was Hoover's destruction of Congressman Cornelius Gallagher, who was concerned about the use of the Bureau's technologies to spy on Americans. Gallagher spoke about this in Congress and began to hold hearings on the topic. Hoover sent an emissary to warn him about his activities.

When Gallagher persisted, the Director manufactured a scenario of Gallagher being tied in with the local New Jersey mob. The FBI broke into his home and stole his personal stationery. Hoover's operatives then forged documents to connect Gallagher to local Mafia chieftain Joe Zicarelli. They also forged telephone tapes of Gallagher talking to Zicarelli.

Hoover and DeLoach got *Life* magazine to publish that false story. DeLoach then told Gallagher's lawyer that unless the congressman resigned DeLoach would have *Life* print a story that a New Jersey gambler had died of a heart attack at Gallagher's home while in bed with his wife. [See Anthony Summers, *Official and Confidential*, pgs. 211-12.]

### **Hoover's Secrets**

But this is just the beginning of the evils that Hoover indulged himself in while Director. Hoover allowed his agents to conduct unauthorized mail intercept programs, cable intercept programs and breaking and entering called black back jobs in order to steal and plant evidence, usually on leftist groups. [See Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and his Secrets*, pgs. 282-84].

Beyond that, Hoover conducted taps on phones and planted surveillance bugs in homes and businesses. [Ibid, pgs. 285-86] When authors tried to tell the public about some of the things Hoover did, he would send agents to try and thwart publication of these books and magazine articles. [Ibid, pgs. 386, 462] He even went as far as sending agents into library archives to remove documents that could be used to discredit him. [Ibid, pgs. 288-89]

Meanwhile, Hoover authorized books to be written about the Bureau hiding his personal crimes and exaggerating and glorifying the Bureau's triumphs e.g. Don Whitehead's *The FBI Story*. He then had books ghost-written for him by agents on company time, e.g. *Master of Deceit*.

Not paying for the writing, Hoover could then pocket the profits himself. He

would cover this windfall by saying he would donate the profits to something called The FBI Recreational Association. This turned out to be a slush fund used by him at his discretion. [Ibid, p. 448]

### **Inspiring McCarthy**

Hoover played a prominent role in creating the Red Scare in the Fifties. In fact, some writers maintain that it was really Hoover who created Joe McCarthy by supplying him with reams of questionable information, which Hoover could not get into the record himself.

This, in turn, created the hysteria to persecute Communists and leftist sympathizers, even though it was not a crime to be a Communist and the relatively small movement supported many worthy reforms, such as the end to racial segregation. Nevertheless, Hoover's Red Scare resulted in personal tragedies like the case of the Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters, actors and directors who were blacklisted for their leftist political beliefs.

Although Hoover toiled at exaggerating to an insane degree the number of people in the Communist Party and how dangerous they were to America, he ignored the influence of the Mob in American life all the way up to the notorious Apalachin Raid in 1957, which discovered a meeting of about 100 Mafiosi in upstate New York.

Even after that proof of a national crime syndicate, Hoover never really ratcheted up the man-hours or legal techniques used against the Mafia until Robert Kennedy became Attorney General and pushed him into it. RFK thought it silly to use as many agents as Hoover did on the Communist Party since he famously said that a large percentage of those presumed Communists were actually FBI informants.

In another split with the Kennedys, Hoover never worried about white militant groups in the South or the violations of the Brown v. Board of Education decision, striking down "separate-but-equal" schools. In fact, in a meeting at the White House in 1954, Hoover actually discounted the power of the Ku Klux Klan despite its long record of racial violence. [Gentry, p. 141]

When the Freedom Riders began their efforts to integrate public facilities in the South, Hoover knew at least two weeks in advance that the Klan planned to use violence to terrorize the protesters. The FBI even alerted the police in Montgomery when the bus was coming, knowing that the local police were working with the Klan. [Ibid, p. 483-485]

When the violence broke out in Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama and several people were severely beaten it was Robert Kennedy who had to call out federal

marshals to stop it. It was this dereliction of duty by Hoover that sparked criticism from Martin Luther King Jr against the FBI's laxness on Klan violence. King's criticism infuriated Hoover because he didn't like the fact that he was a racist to be implied in public. [Ibid, p. 497]

But Hoover made sure that most of the FBI's Special Agents in Charge, and their assistants, in southern cities were southerners. [Ibid, p. 499] Though Hoover's later smearing of King's character became infamous, Hoover already had a long record of collecting personal gossip and sexual blackmail against prominent individuals, including President Dwight Eisenhower. [Ibid, p. 441]

The FBI also had opened a file on King in 1958, long before he came to national prominence. There were at least 20 black bag jobs on King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) *that were recorded*. And as Gentry points out, the aim of these was to get information on King himself.

One of the worst aspects of Hoover's career was the launching of the infamous COINTELPRO assaults on certain groups, most notably the Black Panthers. This program employed the use of informants, double agents, newspaper assets, surveillance, and alliances with local police to sow discord and division within target groups, which often would degenerate into violent confrontations.

A prime example was the 1969 killing of Chicago Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark while they were sleeping. [See "How the FBI Tried to Destroy the Black Panthers" in *Government by Gunplay*, edited by Sid Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian.]

### **A Pattern of Abuses**

The above compilation of Hoover's abuses could go on and on: he hired lying witnesses like Harvey Matusow to put innocent people in jail; the FBI either planted or built the famous Woodstock typewriter to corroborate witness Whittaker Chambers's spy accusations against State Department official Alger Hiss; Hoover lied about how he rolled up a group of Nazi spies during World War II; and he watched as the two informants in the group were sentenced to long prison terms at hard labor.

Yet beyond wanting to giving the reader a real taste of what Hoover was like, I have summarized his career to make an important point about the Black/Eastwood film, which is this: *none of the above is in this popular movie!*

Which means the worst things that Hoover did are left out of the film. Of course, it would be impossible to detail, or even mention in passing, all of the above. But surely any honest film about the man would have to deal with at least some of it. But this film does not. So right off the bat, the viewer gets a

whitewashed view of just how bad Hoover really was.

Most of the film's 137 minute running time consists of five episodes: 1.) Hoover's relationship with his mother; 2.) His relationship with his assistant Clyde Tolson; 3.) Hoover's role in the World War I-era Palmer Raids; 4.) The FBI's role in the Lindbergh child kidnapping case; 5.) The composition of a letter to Martin Luther King in which the FBI implied that he should commit suicide or else the Bureau would blackmail him about his infidelity.

The first two are personal matters of course. But before we get to them, it is interesting to explore how Black deals with the latter three since they are the incidents he uses to elucidate Hoover's professional career.

### **Exaggerating a Red Scare**

The Palmer Raids are named after A. Mitchell Palmer who was Attorney General from 1919-1921. After a series of bombings, including one right outside his home, he was coaxed into organizing two raids by the Bureau of Investigation the forerunner of the FBI against suspected radicals who were behind the violence.

The problem was that the acts were carried out by anarchists, which the Bureau had very little information about. So instead, the raids were set up and planned against leftists, who the Bureau *did* have much information about.

Hoover had been in on the gathering of this information from the age of 22, when he was placed in charge of a unit in the Enemy Alien Registration Section of the Justice Department. [Gentry, p. 69] Hoover studied previous Justice Department raids against leftist unions like the IWW. And he became enamored of the dragnet-type raid. [Ibid, p. 73]

Before going any further, let us briefly describe what the film depicts about Hoover and the raids. Played by Leonardo DiCaprio, Hoover rides his bike down to the scene of the explosion near Palmer's house. He then is depicted as a foot soldier in the actual raids. As Palmer then leaves office, Hoover is heard saying, "I was only following orders."

To put it mildly, this is not what actually happened. First of all, to depict Hoover riding a bike to the scene is a bit of a stretch. The man was 24 years old at the time. He was not just a kid, as Eastwood and Black seem to imply. Further, he was not just a foot soldier, and he was not just following orders.

As Gentry and Tony Summers describe, Hoover actually assembled the lists of suspects for the two raids. But further, he also helped in cobbling together the (very weak) legal underpinnings for the raids, arrests, and deportation hearings. [Gentry, pgs. 81-82]

For the second series of raids, which began in late December of 1919, Hoover actually prepared the warrants all 3,000 of them. [Ibid, p. 89] These warrants usually contained only the name of the alien and the unsupported allegation that he was a member of the Communist Party.

Considering the advance work he did, Hoover was too valuable to be off in the field. In reality, and unlike what Eastwood depicts, he was back in the office coordinating things if anyone had any legal problem in the actual practice of the raids. [ibid, p. 91] We know this from the actual written instructions given to the agents involved in the raids.

Finally, Black's script underplays just how bad the raids were. Approximately 10,000 men were arrested. Within a week, about 6,000 were released since there was not even a card to prove they were Communist Party members, indicating how bad Hoover's files were.

Of the remaining 4,000, about half had been arrested without warrants. In many cases, the warrants were delivered *after* the arrest. Yet even with all of these rights violations, Hoover still tried to get judges to set high bail bonds so the detainees could not be released.

He then set up a propaganda organ inside the Bureau to pass information onto newspapers putting the best possible spin on the raids. In spite of the fact that even with all the legal lacunae he supervised, almost no weapons of violent revolution had been found. [Gentry, pgs. 94-95]

Hoover also was in on the legal preparations for the deportation hearings. [Ibid, p. 95] He also granted interviews to newspapers like the *New York Times*. And when Palmer was called before Congress, Hoover sat next to him and supplied him with documents. [Ibid. p. 100]

These propaganda ploys were meant to disguise the fact that Hoover, who had a law degree, must have known that the raids employed a fistful of illegal acts and doctrines that anticipated the police state tactics soon to be used in the fascist nations of Italy and Germany. When lawyers did begin to write about these issues, what did Hoover do? He opened files on them for speaking out. [Ibid, p. 99]

These facts belie the presentation by Black and Eastwood of Hoover as a bicycle-riding innocent foot soldier who was only following orders. In fact, what they present better fits the embroidered image that Hoover used afterwards to try and discount his key role in this sorry episode.

## **Lindbergh Case**

Let us now look at the film's depiction of the 1932 kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's infant son.

As Black and Eastwood show, the local and state authorities did not want the Bureau involved. But it is also true that Hoover had the opportunity to stake out the meeting at which ransom money was exchanged for information on where the child was being held. Hoover decided not to do so. [Gentry, p. 150]

This turned out to be a mistake since the child was not at the location where the kidnapper's said he was. He was already dead. And the decomposed body was within five miles of Lindbergh's home. This discovery finally got the Bureau involved through the orders of the president. And shortly after Congress passed what became known as the Lindbergh Law, making kidnapping a federal offense and giving Hoover jurisdiction.

But this expansion of his authority became a problem since Hoover had great difficulty solving the case: the arrest of Bruno Hauptmann was not made for over two and a half years.

In fact, Hoover always thought that more than one person was involved and that there was likely an inside agent as part of the plot. Hoover first suspected for this role the baby's nursemaid, Betty Gow, who was the last person to see the infant in the crib and the first to discover his absence. [Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Case that Never Dies*, p. 32]

Also, unlike what the film shows, Hoover's certainty about the guilt of Hauptmann was not close to absolute. Indeed, his agents told him that the local authorities had fiddled with the evidence.

We now know today, through the work of Anthony Scaduto in his 1977 book *Scapegoat*, that the prosecution had employment records in their possession that they hid from the defense that made it very difficult to believe that Hauptmann could have driven from New York City (where he was working that day) to New Jersey, the scene of the crime, at the time he was supposed to be there.

Further, the prosecutors even tampered with the start date of Hauptmann's New York job to make it appear he was not even there on the day of the kidnapping. (For a brief overview of the case, [click here](#))

As Curt Gentry notes, in October 1934, three months before Hauptmann's trial began, Hoover called a press conference to announce the FBI was withdrawing from the case. [Gentry, p. 162] From then, until Hauptmann's execution in April 1936, there was a long series of FBI memoranda marking the Bureau's and Hoover's doubts about the case.

Agent Leon Turrou, Hoover's main liaison to the local authorities from the time of the indictment, called the proceedings against Hauptmann "a mockery" of a trial. For instance, one of the main witnesses used to identify the defendant was a Dr. Condon, who met in a cemetery with a man sent to collect the ransom. Yet Condon failed to pick Hauptmann out of a line-up.

And two days after, Condon told Turrou that Hauptmann was not the man he met. The man he met was much heavier, had different eyes, different hair etc. [Ibid, p. 163] Yet, by the time of the trial, someone had changed his mind and he was now positive it was Hauptmann.

Same thing with Charles Lindbergh who only heard the man's voice in the cemetery. At first, Lindbergh said he could not positively identify the voice as Hauptmann's. But by the time he took the stand, Lindbergh positively identified it.

A witness who placed Hauptmann near the Lindbergh home was characterized in an FBI memo as "a confirmed liar and totally unreliable." [Ibid, p. 163]

Hoover himself doubted some of the evidence in the case. For instance as he admitted in a memo of Sept. 24, 1934, before the trial started, the defendant's fingerprints did not match "the latent impressions developed on the ransom notes."

And as Lloyd Garner writes, Hauptmann's fingerprints were not on the ladder allegedly used to climb to the infant's window at the Lindbergh home. The local authorities then washed the ladder of all prints and failed to disclose that Hauptmann's were not there. [Gardner, p. 344]

This is why when Lindbergh praised the FBI for its work on the case, Hoover was not thankful but indignant. [Gentry, p. 163] Of course, the FBI later concealed its doubts and made the case a hallmark of the official tour for propaganda purposes.

Eastwood and Black, again, sell the public the amended version, with both Hoover and Tolson in daily attendance at the trial, which was not the case.

### **Harassing King**

An entire film could have been put together about Hoover's dark obsession with Martin Luther King. Yet of the three main episodes about the FBI depicted in the film, the Palmer Raids, the Hauptmann case and King the smearing of the civil rights leader takes the least amount of screen time.

What the movie's account essentially consists of is DiCaprio reciting the famous



letter to be sent to King blackmailing him about his infidelity and suggesting he take his own life before this behavior was exposed.

Director Eastwood depicts King and another woman in a hotel room, and Hoover listening to audiotapes of the tryst. This scene occurred in 1964-65, yet one would never know that Hoover first opened files on King in 1958. Also left out is that Hoover had arranged other campaigns to damage previous prominent African-Americans, such as Marcus Garvey and Paul Robeson. [Summers, p. 352]

Another inconvenient fact was that prior to the Kennedys taking office, there were at most five black agents in the Bureau, except they were not really agents. They had gone to a segregated FBI school and were only called special agents to exempt them from the draft for World War II. In reality, each one was either a chauffeur or butler. [Michael Friedly and David Gallen, *Martin Luther King Jr.: The FBI File*, p. 61]

As mentioned at the beginning of this review, Hoover's racism extended to the struggle for civil rights in the South. As one commentator inside the Bureau wrote, the FBI never enforced civil rights law since Hoover was opposed to the civil rights program.

The only reason things eventually changed was because Bobby Kennedy put pressure on Hoover to support civil rights workers. But prior to that time, Hoover ignored the wholesale violation of civil rights on the part of Southern law enforcement. [Ibid, p. 62]

All of this is a necessary prelude to understanding the mania that Hoover had about figures like King and Malcolm X. As early as 1963, Hoover had called a meeting to explore "avenues of approach aimed at neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader." [Summers, p. 353] This meeting led to the proposal of 21 avenues for achieving the goal.

About a month later, Hoover had what he thought were tapes of King partying in a hotel room with women present. He was overjoyed. He wrote a memo about it that said, "This will destroy the burrhead." [Gentry, p. 568]

### **Undermining Civil Rights**

The FBI's campaign was meant to not just discredit and humiliate King, but to derail the civil rights movement by leaving it without a charismatic leader, thereby giving Hoover the opportunity to maneuver someone of his own liking into that position. Preferably a much more conservative, less dynamic, and more establishment figure. [Summers, p. 354]

Hoover also used these tapes to try and drive a wedge between first, King and

Bobby Kennedy, and then King and Lyndon Johnson. It did not succeed with the former, but as the Vietnam War escalated, it did succeed with the latter. [Ibid, p. 355]

Hoover ordered his agents to lobby organizations against giving King any official honors e.g. Marquette University in 1964. The FBI also worked hard to stop any media outlets from featuring him on TV, radio or in print media.

As time went on, Hoover tried to weaken support for King in Congress by furnishing blackmail material to representatives and senators. Hoover also made the material available to other civil right leaders, like Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, to create dissatisfaction with King and dissension in the ranks. [Gentry, p. 574]

Hoover even used his influence with Cardinal Spellman of New York to try and stop Pope Paul VI from granting King an audience in the Vatican. [Summers, p. 356] When King was about to get his Nobel Prize, Hoover went ballistic, trying to get his blackmail tapes published by the press, e.g. executive editor Ben Bradlee at the *Washington Post*. (Ibid, p. 358)

All of this bile originated not just with Hoover's inherent racism, but also because of King's criticism of the Bureau's inaction on the violation of civil rights in the South. Angered by the criticism, Hoover also smeared King with allegations that he was being influenced by Communists. [Gentry, p. 506]

This sorry episode culminated with the sending of a composite tape and the threatening letter to King's wife and to his organization's headquarters in Atlanta in early 1965. This was meant to stop King from collecting his Nobel Prize, but failed. However, it did cause King emotional turmoil. [Summers, p. 361]

### **Background Missing**

This would seem to me to be important information in preparing the viewer for DiCaprio reciting the blackmailing letter. Yet virtually all of it is missing from the film. Therefore, the episode is robbed of both its personal and historical background. Clearly, Black does not want the viewer to know just how deep-rooted and longstanding Hoover's racism was.

But what makes the omissions even worse is that Black and Eastwood then try to soften Hoover's bigotry. The filmmakers have Hoover dictating his memoirs to a black agent and have Hoover talking about his actions against the Klan in the South.

Regarding the former, knowing what we do about Hoover, this seems a real

stretch. About the latter, the script leaves out the fact that there were virtually no actions in that area until Bobby Kennedy urged Hoover to use his COINTELPRO techniques against the Klan. [Gentry, p. 563]

Let us summarize what Black has done with Hoover's biographical materials. He left out the worst aspects of Hoover's career. Then in considering the actual facts and history in the three episodes he does describe, the Palmer Raids, the Hauptmann case, and the campaign against King, he left out key facts in order to make Hoover appear in a softer and hazier light.

One can fairly conclude that screenwriter Black had an agenda, which director Eastwood either condoned or agreed with. The result is that Black and Eastwood have done what a PR man might do, given the public's general knowledge about Hoover's unsavory history: they sprayed deodorant under his armpits and splashed some cologne on him so that this thoroughly deplorable villain could sit next to us at the dinner table.

According to Black and Eastwood, Hoover really wasn't such a bad guy after all. Sorry, some of us know better.

Let me end this section with this comparison. When Oliver Stone uses dramatic license in his political films, he gets pilloried from pillar to post and back again. Yet I detect little or no outrage from the familiar quarters for what Eastwood and Black have done with the record here. Why not?

### **Eastwood's Career**

In the last two decades, Eastwood has managed to elevate his reputation and standing in the film colony in a way that would have seemed nearly impossible back in say 1971, the year that *Dirty Harry* was released.

If one recalls, Eastwood first got noticed by doing the TV series *Rawhide*, three so-called spaghetti Westerns with Italian director Sergio Leone, and the first of five movies in the *Dirty Harry* series.

Established as an actor with box-office appeal, Eastwood formed his own production company, called Malpaso, and produced, directed and/or starred in such films as *Breezy*, *The Eiger Sanction*, *Every Which Way but Loose*, *Any Which Way You Can*, *Honky Tonk Man*, *City Heat*, *Pink Cadillac*, *The Rookie* and so on.

Pretty much forgettable fare. But since Eastwood's much overrated Western *Unforgiven*, there seems to have been an almost industry-wide agreement to make believe that Eastwood is somehow both a fine actor and a serious director. Even people like Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese have joined in the effort.

This tells us a lot about the decline of American film, and the concomitant ascension of people like Quentin Tarantino, the Coen brothers, Kathryn Bigelow and Eastwood.

If one defines acting in its purest sense as channeling what one has into creating someone different than oneself, i.e. applying one's voice, carriage, intelligence and imagination to enliven this other persona, when has Eastwood ever done that?

When has he ever transformed himself like say Philip Seymour Hoffman did in the film *Capote*? Or say Robert DeNiro did in *The Last Tycoon*, or *Bang the Drum Slowly*? When did he ever do what Gene Hackman did in *The Conversation*?

At his best, Eastwood flexes his persona to *indicate* someone else. But this after the fact elevation of Eastwood as an actor has now led to his elevation as a director. I cannot remember an Eastwood-directed film from which I recall any memorable editing montage, any remarkable photographic effects, or any kind of extraordinary use of what is called *mise-en-scene*, that is the placement and movement of actors within the frame.

What makes this such a telling point is that Eastwood's directing career goes all the way back to 1971 and the film *Play Misty for Me*. And that non-distinction continues here.

### **Little Creativity**

I generously counted two directorial strophes that were above the pedestrian. When DiCaprio listens to the illicit tapes, Eastwood shows us two silhouettes on the wall of a hotel room beginning to undress. When the body of the Lindbergh baby is discovered, the camera tilts up to show how close it was to the Lindbergh home. And that is it for a 137-minute film.

But what is even more surprising is that the actor Eastwood does very little, if anything, with his cast. DiCaprio takes on a different voice, but it's not Hoover's voice. And it sometimes lapses into Boston Irish, and then into a southern drawl.

This might be excusable (although there are many voice coaches available to aid in these things). But DiCaprio does not even capture the unusual speech cadence that Hoover had, the stop-start, staccato phrasing the man used.

And even when Hoover ages, I could not discern a real attempt to capture the unusual gait that Hoover had, which made him seem even more compact and bearish than he was. As for conveying any of the malevolence or manipulation in the man, DiCaprio barely registers it.

Naomi Watts walks through her nondescript role as Hoover's secretary Helen Gandy. Armie Hammer as Hoover's friend and assistant, Clyde Tolson, is a complete non-entity. And when Eastwood ages him he gets even worse.

First, the make-up is bizarre, making Tolson look like a walking exhibit from a waxworks museum. And Tolson did not look like that, as anyone can see from his photos at Hoover's funeral. But secondly, Hammer's attempts to simulate old age are pure amateur-night stuff: the slow walk with shaking arms. It is out of summer-stock theater.

If Eastwood could not get a performance out of someone like Hammer, one could excuse him. But what can one say if a director cannot do anything with Dame Judy Dench? This is the actress who was voted as giving the finest female performance ever in the Royal Shakespeare Company as Lady MacBeth. Dench delivers here a performance at about the level of former TV actress Linda Lavin.

Eastwood is famous for not rehearsing and not wanting to do more than three or so takes of a scene. The result of that method is pretty obvious in *J. Edgar*. These actors needed to be pushed harder. Eastwood doesn't do that, nor does he believe in it.

### **Kissing Scene**

Let me end with what Black and Eastwood use as the climax of the film. It is a lover's quarrel between Tolson and Hoover in a hotel room. They are on vacation and Hoover says he is thinking of taking a wife, Myrna Loy.

This causes Tolson to get angry, and a fistfight ensues. But then Hammer kisses DiCaprio. I wondered where this scene came from since I had not seen it mentioned in any of the now standard biographies of Hoover.

I finally located it in a book that is not considered a standard reference work, *Puppetmaster* by Richard Hack. On page 233 of that book, an argument is described between the two men at a hotel. But it does not resemble the one that Black and Eastwood depict.

Hack just writes about an argument the two had which, he said, resulted from some apparent slight to Hoover by Tolson. That is it. Nothing about Hoover taking a wife and Tolson flying into a jealous rage.

But further Hack does not footnote this episode either. So we don't know how reliable the sourcing is. But apparently that didn't bother Black from using it to fulfill his agenda.

If Black didn't have an agenda, if he had been interested in who Hoover really

was, what he represented, and what his pernicious impact on America really was, he would have shown us a different confrontation, such as the one that went on between Hoover and Director of Domestic Intelligence William Sullivan.

To my knowledge, Sullivan was the only man in the executive offices who ever stood up to Hoover. About a year or two before Hoover died, Sullivan wrote a series of memos criticizing Hoover's performance as Director on issues like his gross exaggeration of the Communist threat inside the USA, his failure to hire African-American agents, and his failure to enforce civil rights laws. Sullivan also had tired of Hoover's blackmail surveillance on presidents and began to think the Director was not of sound mind. [Summers, pgs. 397-99]

This culminated in a meeting in Hoover's office where Sullivan said Hoover should retire. Hoover refused, and it was Sullivan who was forced out of the Bureau. Sullivan later testified before the Church Committee and gave Congress much inside information about Hoover's illegal operations.

Sullivan once told columnist Robert Novak that if one day he would read about his death in some kind of accident, Novak should not believe it; it would be murder.

In 1977, during the re-investigations of the killings of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Sullivan died in New Hampshire as he was meeting with friends to go deer hunting. Another hunter, with a telescopic sight, mistook Sullivan for a deer and killed him with his rifle.

The book that Sullivan was working on about his 30 years in the FBI was then posthumously published, but reportedly in much expurgated form. He was one of six current or former FBI officials who died in a six-month period in 1977, the season of inquiry into FBI dirty deeds and FBI cover-ups of political assassinations.

If this film had ended with the Sullivan-Hoover feud, it would have told us something about both America and about Hoover. But it would have been dark and truthful. Evidently, Black and Eastwood were not interested in that.

Black's agenda is pretty clear. Why Eastwood went along with this pastel-colored romance about a man who was a blackmailing monster is difficult to understand. But it proves again, as Pauline Kael explained decades ago, why Clint Eastwood is no artist. Artists don't compromise. And they don't falsify.

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