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Pbs Show Opens Closet Door On Hoover's Sexuality, Mob Ties

February 9, 1993 | By TOM JICHA, TV/Radio Writer

Frontline does unto J. Edgar Hoover as he did unto others.

The PBS documentary series tonight peeps into the bedroom and other seamy aspects of the man who guided the FBI for almost a half-century. Two wrongs might not make a right, but they do make for an explosive and deliciously scandalous hour.

Frontline contends that Hoover was "personally corrupt, sexually compromised and tainted by ties to organized crime."

It also alleges Hoover used surreptitiously obtained evidence of John F. Kennedy's womanizing to blackmail him into offering the vice presidency to Lyndon B. Johnson, a Hoover ally.

Frontline also repeats and elaborates on the belief that Hoover, who labeled homosexuals "sex deviants," had a homosexual relationship with his aide Clyde Tolson. In addition to the hypocrisy involved, Hoover's sexual orientation is significant because organized crime found out about it and used the threat of exposing him to keep the FBI off its case.

Anthony Summers, author of the Hoover biography *Official and Confidential*, said notorious mob figure Meyer Lansky was one of those who had pictures of Hoover and Tolson in a compromising situation. "Lansky controlled the pictures and he had made his deal with Hoover to lay off," Summers said.

A fashion model who, with her date, socialized with Hoover and Tolson one New Year's, said she saw Hoover and Tolson holding hands in the backseat of a car. Later that evening, she says she heard Tolson express a desire to dance with Hoover at the Cotton Club in Harlem. The irony is, Hoover was livid at the time because he saw an interracial couple on the dance floor, according to the woman.

Susan Rosenstiel, wife of Louis Rosenstiel, who is identified as a mob-connected bootlegger, says she went to a party at New York's Plaza Hotel, where she was promised a surprise. She was greeted at the door by a man in "a black chiffon dress, very short with ruffles, and black lace stockings and high-heeled shoes and a black curly wig and black eyelashes."

The person was introduced to her as Mary. "It was clearly J. Edgar Hoover," she says.

Later, two teen-aged boys arrived, according to Susan Rosenstiel, and Hoover, Roy Cohn and her husband went into the bedroom and had sex with them.

"I heard (her husband Louis) Rosenstiel say that if Hoover ever brings pressure against Lansky or any of us, we'll use this as blackmail."

Throughout his career, Hoover claimed there was no such thing as a national crime family. He insisted organized crime was a local problem, which put it outside the jurisdiction of the FBI.

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Ralph Salerno, head of the New York Committee on Organized Crime, says the hands-off policy had dire ramifications. ``If they (the mob) could have been attacked before they grew, before they got the wealth, before they got the knowledge, organized crime could have been nipped in the bud ... (the mob) never would have grown as strong as it got to be in later decades.``

Another reason Hoover might have gone easy on the mob, it is offered, is that he liked to play the horses, and the bookmakers he used to place bets were all mob backed. What's more, it adds, Hoover had the kind of arrangement gamblers dream of.

According to Mrs. Rosenstiel, ``(My husband) would call the boys up and they would make the bets. If Hoover won, he got paid. If he didn't win, they would just forget it.``

Gambling debts evidently were not all Hoover didn't pay. He reportedly never picked up a check.

Also, John Dowd, head of the government's Organized Crime Strike Force, says, ``Four years after Hoover died, I was assigned to conduct an investigation of 40 years of fraud and corruption by J. Edgar Hoover, in which he had taken at taxpayers' expense, goods and services provided to him by employees of the FBI.``

These perks included elaborate vacations disguised as business trips; using his government limos -- he had three -- for personal pleasure; using FBI personnel to service his lawn and to embellish and furnish his home.

Dowd also cites an incident his investigation uncovered that illustrates how petty Hoover could be. One day he found excrement on his patio and requested it be investigated to find out where it came from.

The FBI crime lab, diverted from other chores, reported back that it was a raccoon's.

Hoover had no compunctions about accepting gratuities from underworld figures. Says Salerno, ``He was being wined and dined royally without paying any of those expenses himself. Yet I know that if one of his sterling agents took a glass of beer from a questionable person or even from a legitimate citizen, he would have been shanghaied out to Butte, Montana; might even have been asked to resign.``

Former Vice President Walter Mondale says the key issue in exposing Hoover's transgressions is: ``the accountability of powerful people to the law. What we saw here was a powerful public officer, in charge of America's most important law enforcement agency, who had cut himself off from any accountability to the law.``

It is not too late to right at least one of the wrongs associated with Hoover, says Hank Messick, a former investigative reporter for the Las Vegas Sun, who calls Hoover ``a disaster`` for law enforcement.

``I think it would be a very helpful, healthy thing for this nation to strike Hoover's name from the FBI building, because Hoover does not deserve the honor. His greatest public service, in my opinion, was his death.``

ON TV

Program: Frontline: The Secret File on J. Edgar Hoover

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