J. Edgar Hoover and the Anti-interventionists
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FBI Political Surveillance and the Rise of the Domestic Security State, 1939–1945

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For my parents, Jeannette and Daniel Charles
Acknowledgments ix
Introduction 1

Chapter 1 Background 17

Chapter 2 Beginnings
War, Phony War, and Election
1939–40 39

Chapter 3 Intensification
The Lend-Lease Debate, America First, and Its Allies
December 1940 to Summer 1941 59

Chapter 4 Focus
From Great Debate Stalemate to Wartime Probe
Mid-1941 to Summer 1942 87

Chapter 5 Retribution
The FBI and the Victory Program Leak
4 December 1941 to Mid-1942 114

Chapter 6 Blossoming of the Domestic Security State
November 1941 to March 1942 140

Conclusion 172

Bibliography 179
Index 193
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Between 1939 and 1945, as war ravaged Europe and Asia, J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) monitored the political dissent of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s celebrated anti-interventionist foreign policy critics. This surveillance occurred as Americans popularly perceived a threat from a Nazi “Fifth Column,” which was inflamed by sensational stories of German espionage, leading many otherwise rational citizens and government officials to suspect the motives of legitimate anti-interventionist foreign policy critics. More importantly, the bitter foreign policy debate over American involvement in war proved to be an opportunity for the bureaucrat Hoover who, as a conservative, did not fit the mold of the left-of-center Roosevelt administration. Hoover, therefore, skillfully used the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the Roosevelt administration by catering to the president’s political and policy interests—in providing him detailed political intelligence on foreign policy critics—to demonstrate his worth to the administration, retain his tenure as FBI director, and secure increased authority and autonomy for his bureau. Among those critics he targeted were Charles Lindbergh, the America First Committee, notable senators and congressmen, elements of the anti-interventionist press, and other leading figures in the anti-interventionist movement. Throughout, Roosevelt valued these reports and made no complaints about the impropriety or civil liberties violations of J. Edgar Hoover’s actions.

It was during this period, moreover, when Hoover’s FBI first used its resources in an expansive way to monitor, provide intelligence, and discredit an administration’s political opposition. But while the FBI extensively monitored administration opposition as it never had previously, compared to the Cold War era—where Hoover operated autonomously—the extent of the FBI’s activity was more defined. Whereas, by 1957, the
Cold War FBI had abandoned prosecutions in favor of secret and illegal programs (the COINTELPROS) to disrupt and contain its targets, the FBI during the 1939–45 period consigned itself to the collection and dissemination of political intelligence and worked to silence administration critics by developing legal cases—utilizing the Smith Act, Foreign Agents Registration Act, conspiracy statutes, and (during wartime) the Espionage Act\(^1\)—or by initiating grand jury proceedings that, while nominally secret, might have discredited opposition efforts by casting doubt on their legitimacy. This activity suggests that the FBI’s role in the later national security state, executed while America advocated an activist foreign policy and deferred to executive authority, lies in the prewar foreign policy debate (the so-called Great Debate) where a hidden agenda lay behind interventionist policy and where patterns of FBI behavior mirror those of the Cold War and national security state period.

Further highlighting the development of the FBI as a national security apparatus, dating from 1940 it established a formal relationship with British intelligence. Like Hoover and Roosevelt, the British had a vested interest in the political activities of the anti-interventionists. Whereas Hoover sought to develop legal cases against them, collect derogatory intelligence, and provide the White House with political intelligence that alluded to its critics’ subversiveness, British intelligence sought to hasten American entry into the war by disrupting and discrediting these foreign policy critics. The relationship between the FBI and British intelligence, which had existed on an ad hoc basis dating from the First World War, was made permanent from 1940 and continued to grow, extending into the Cold War years. While the exact scope and nature of the two organizations’ relationship cannot be ascertained fully owing to classification restrictions on relevant documents, nevertheless it is clear that the two maintained close ties. The closeness, origins, and development of the relationship, moreover, demonstrates that the FBI’s international role in the later national security state—where the FBI cooperated intimately with Allied foreign intelligence agencies—had its origins during the Great Debate of 1940–41.

That Hoover was limited to the above tactics during the Great Debate can be understood if we recognize that he did not yet have the level of

\(^1\) The Smith Act of 28 June 1940 prohibited any individual or organization from advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government or membership with a group advocating such an action. The 1940 Foreign Agents Registration Act (amended from the 1938 version) required all foreign-controlled groups to register with the Justice Department.
autonomy that he would during the Cold War, though he did have a
greater level of autonomy than at any previous time. Without complete
assurance that intrusive programs would never be discovered, and until
his position as FBI director was firmly rooted with ideological allies in the
White House or Congress—something Hoover did not develop until the
Cold War—Hoover refused to employ such methods, remembering the
effects wrought on the Bureau of Investigation from discovery of other
illegal tactics employed during the 1919–20 Red Scare. These concerns
were reflected in Hoover’s repeated efforts to counter any criticism that
FBI agents were involved in illegal activity and his public denials that the
FBI collected noncriminal information during the Great Debate. The fact
of the matter, however, is that FBI agents had indeed employed illegal
surveillance tactics and actively sought noncriminal intelligence on the
anti-interventionists for bureaucratic and political purposes.

Further characterizing this period, the FBI director demonstrated that
he was, above all, a pragmatic bureaucrat. Beginning with the Coolidge
administration in 1924, Hoover made himself valuable to each succeeding
administration by providing information he thought each would find use-
ful. Hoover was successful inasmuch as he held onto his high position in
government longer than any comparable figure in American history—he
was FBI director from 1924 until his death in 1972, nearly fifty years. This
pragmatism is significant when one examines the bureau in the context of
the New Deal era. Generally regarded as a watershed in the development
of the welfare state, the New Deal reflected the precept of “big govern-
ment” staffed by left-of-center politicians seeking proactive leadership
in Washington. While on the surface it seems the political views of New
Dealers and J. Edgar Hoover would be at odds, the FBI director thrived
during the Roosevelt administration. He succeeded in cultivating a close
relationship with Roosevelt by using his pragmatism to manipulate the
relationship between the president and the FBI. Hoover became a val-
ued source of information on Roosevelt’s political enemies and useful in
occasional attempts to undermine them. For Roosevelt’s part, his long
personal interest in secret intelligence, in part, explains his receptiveness
to Hoover’s political intelligence reports.2

2. On Roosevelt’s fascination with intelligence see David Stafford, Roosevelt and
Hoover’s pragmatism during this period, however, must also be analyzed within the framework of the correlation between international crisis and growth of power. Hoover’s ability to increase FBI authority has, for the most part, been associated with some concomitant international crisis. More basically, the charged atmosphere created by various international crises resulted in fears of domestic unrest, whether during the First World War, Red Scare, Great Depression, Second World War, Cold War, or War on Terrorism. In each period, the FBI’s power and authority increased, for different reasons, to deal with a perceived domestic threat. During the Great Debate of 1940–41, foreign policy issues provided the impetus for extensive FBI monitoring of White House foreign policy critics who were popularly regarded as subversive. This all took place in the context of a charged international situation that permitted Hoover to cater to President Roosevelt’s domestic political concerns about overcoming his anti-interventionist opposition. Throughout the period, Hoover garnered increased authority and autonomy for his FBI. From this basis, the Cold War FBI was able to evolve into an even more intrusive national security apparatus.

Contemporaries and historians have popularly dubbed Roosevelt’s foreign policy critics during this period “isolationists.” The term “anti-interventionist,” however, will be employed throughout this study. The word “isolationist” is too narrow a descriptor to be applied to Roosevelt’s foreign policy critics who did not advocate isolation from foreign affairs but unilateralism in American foreign relations. Moreover, anti-interventionists themselves never used the word “isolationist,” preferring instead “anti-interventionist” or “noninterventionist.” It was Roosevelt’s interventionist allies who propagated—successfully—the derogatory and inaccurate term “isolationist.”

While Franklin Roosevelt’s anti-interventionist foreign policy opposition included elements from both ends of the political spectrum—from the mostly conservative America First Committee to the leftist American League for Peace and Democracy—this study focuses on his mostly conservative and prominent critics who were associated with America First. (It also does not address those Americans who were caught up in FBI

surveillance activities even though they were not anti-interventionists, as other historians have already documented.) Some nonconservatives are included but only inasmuch as they opposed the centralization of power in the presidency and allied themselves with America First. Anti-interventionists from other points on the political spectrum are excluded primarily for three reasons. First, those associated with the America First Committee were best organized and posed the most significant political threat to administration foreign policy. Second, after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, American leftists and Communists wholeheartedly joined the interventionist cause; thereafter America First remained the only serious threat to administration political interests. Third, Hoover was a fervent anti-Communist with conservative political and social credentials, and his willingness to monitor those of similar political ilk for the left-of-center Roosevelt administration reveals his bureaucratic astuteness. Ever the master bureaucrat, Hoover realized his position in the Roosevelt administration was tenuous and sought to preserve and expand it by catering to the White House’s political and policy interests vis-à-vis the anti-interventionists.

As Hoover was of the political right—like many anti-interventionists, particularly those associated with the America First Committee—the question arises whether he considered himself an interventionist. While he did not publicly advocate American intervention in the war, there is some evidence demonstrating his interventionist credentials. But more important than whether Hoover was an interventionist was his pragmatic character, a man who worked to effect Roosevelt’s political interests. Hoover, moreover, would likely have regarded anti-interventionists as “subversives” or “un-American” in part because of the popular associations many had made between anti-interventionists and radical or fascist elements. This followed a popular outlook dating from the 1930s, and extending into the early Cold War, that identified Stalinism and Nazism as essentially similar totalitarian regimes. Hoover may have held such views and, coupled with popular perceptions of anti-interventionists as witting or unwitting

4. The wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union did not end in any way FBI surveillance of domestic communist and leftist activity. On the FBI’s continued efforts in this area see Athan Theoharis, Chasing Spies: How the FBI Failed in Counterintelligence But Promoted the Politics of McCarthyism in the Cold War Years (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 34–78.

5. Hoover was conservative both politically (though he never joined a political party) and socially. He was a strong anti-Communist and had the support of a large conservative constituency who, by the Cold War period, sought to dismantle the trappings of Roosevelt’s New Deal. He was also a racist, sexist, and intolerant of homosexuality.
Nazi dupes, he may have regarded some fellow conservatives as domestic threats. His derogatory political reports to the White House only served to bolster this perception.⁶

This book makes use of previously classified FBI files. Only in the last few years have the FBI files of Charles Lindbergh, the America First Committee, and other prominent anti-interventionists, for example, been available for research. As a result, previous discourses about the bureau’s political surveillance during this period have been tentative and incomplete. Historians of anti-interventionism, furthermore, have either been only tangentially interested in FBI activity or have been unaware of intricate FBI programs, filing procedures, and vested FBI interests. Historians of the FBI, while not unaware of other periods, have been disproportionately interested in the agency’s Red Scare days (1919–20) or its Cold War activities. Much has been missed through these oversights, particularly new information that reveals the true extent of FBI surveillance activity from 1939 to 1945 and the origins of the FBI’s intimate international intelligence relationships. As a result, FBI political surveillance during this important period has never received the full treatment it deserves.

FBI files are the single most important source of information for this study. All bureau files created since 1924 have been retained by the FBI and are not deposited in the National Archives except for the J. Edgar Hoover Official and Confidential file in 2005. For over seventy years, FBI files have remained the preserve of FBI officials who have opened them to only a select number of “friendly” journalists.⁷ Only when amendments were made in 1974 to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) did researchers have access to these important documents, but with access comes restriction. Exemptions to the FOIA include classified material, privacy-rights related information, and anything revealing FBI sources and methods. With FBI employees’ subjective use of the black felt tip pen, researchers are presented with sometimes heavily censored documents. In addition, it


is the responsibility of the requester to pay processing costs (at ten cents per page for files that can be thousands of pages long), which can become very expensive. Moreover, FBI understaffing and budgetary restrictions have created very long delays in the processing of requests (in 1996 the bureau averaged fifty requests per day). It is not uncommon to wait years for a single FOIA request to be finalized. Nevertheless, FBI records are a vital and important, if sometimes frustrating and tantalizing, source of information.  

This book makes historiographical contributions in three areas: the history of FBI political surveillance, the history of the anti-interventionist/interventionist foreign policy debate, and the history of the rise of the American national security state. Most historians of the FBI have focused either on its abuses during the Red Scare of 1919–20\(^9\) or its political intelligence activities during the Cold War era.\(^{10}\) Some FBI historians have examined the FBI’s political surveillance of Roosevelt’s anti-interventionist foreign policy critics, but only as a small part of larger studies. Athan Theoharis briefly mentioned the FBI’s monitoring of anti-interventionists in his broad study Spying on Americans (1978), in his biography of FBI Director Hoover, The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American...
Introduction

Inquisition (1988), and in his The FBI and American Democracy: A Brief Critical History (2004). Likewise, both Richard Powers and Curt Gentry in their books mentioned but only in passing that the FBI had monitored Roosevelt's critics.

Some historians of anti-interventionism and Roosevelt's foreign policy also have only sketchily examined the FBI's surveillance of anti-interventionists. Their interests have concentrated on the politics of anti-interventionism, and while recognizing FBI political surveillance perhaps have neglected it through a lack of documentation. Wayne S. Cole has studied anti-interventionists more than anyone else and in his magnum opus, Roosevelt and the Isolationists (1983), only briefly surveyed the FBI's surveillance. In his book Storm on the Horizon (2000), Justus Doenecke briefly noted the FBI's efforts. Robert Dallek's broad survey of Roosevelt's foreign policy, similar to Cole's and Doenecke's, offered only one passing reference to the FBI.

A few historians, nevertheless, have examined the FBI's political surveillance of the anti-interventionists more directly than these broad studies. Richard W. Steele in his article “Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Foreign Policy Critics” (1979) attempted fuller coverage of FBI investigations into the anti-interventionists, but was limited by the inaccessibility (at the time) of FBI records. Steele focused on President Roosevelt and argued that he intentionally directed Hoover, citing his 1934 and 1936 directives, to investigate his anti-interventionist opponents in an effort to destroy them. As Steele's argument was based on only a limited number of FBI documents, Roosevelt papers, and congressional reports, he placed too much emphasis on Roosevelt's machinations as distinct from J. Edgar Hoover's own priorities. Steele did not widely examine FBI monitoring of anti-interventionists


and, because his documentation was limited, he focused more on the White House than the FBI.¹⁶

Charles Croog has analyzed the FBI’s political surveillance of anti-interventionists in his article “FBI Political Surveillance and the Isolationist-Interventionist Debate, 1939–1941” (1992). Croog argued that Roosevelt and Hoover fully agreed upon the national security mission of the FBI and that the FBI’s investigation of anti-interventionists was limited. In making this argument, Croog stated that FBI “resources were never significantly mobilized against Roosevelt’s law-abiding opponents.” Yet Croog’s piece suffered from one major weakness. Like Steele, Croog employed only a limited base of evidence to support his conclusions: his footnotes show that he used only a portion of the America First Committee FBI file, congressional hearings, and reports. Croog thereby vastly underestimated the true extent and nature of FBI political surveillance.¹⁷

Kenneth O’Reilly examined the FBI’s political surveillance of Roosevelt’s foreign policy opponents in the context of the agency’s New Deal expansion in his “A New Deal for the FBI: The Roosevelt Administration, Crime Control, and National Security” (1982). O’Reilly examined FBI institutional changes made during the New Deal in the areas of crime control and national security. While he used a broader base of evidence than previous historians, when analyzing the FBI’s monitoring of foreign policy critics he nevertheless concluded, contrary to Steele, that “the Roosevelt administration’s purposes were essentially benevolent.”¹⁸

Anthan Theoharis examined an aspect of the FBI’s surveillance of the anti-interventionist press in his article “The FBI, the Roosevelt Administration, and the ‘Subversive’ Press” (1993). Making more extensive use of FBI files, Theoharis analyzed the FBI’s monitoring of prominent members of the anti-interventionist press and the Roosevelt administration’s desire to settle scores with them after the American entry into the Second World War. Theoharis concluded that a complete understanding of the episode could not be ascertained until further documentation was declassified.¹⁹

¹⁶. Richard W. Steele, “Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Foreign Policy Critics,” Political Science Quarterly 94 (Spring 1979): 15–32. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. commented on Steele’s piece, arguing that he had made overstatements, and claimed Steele’s article read more like a prosecutorial brief than a historical assessment. See his “A Comment on Roosevelt and His Foreign Policy Critics,” Political Science Quarterly 94 (Spring 1979): 33–35.
¹⁹. Athan Theoharis, “The FBI, the Roosevelt Administration, and the ‘Subversive’
My own articles on the FBI and the anti-interventionists, early results of my research, examined limited aspects of the FBI’s political surveillance. In “FBI Political Surveillance and the Charles Lindbergh Investigation, 1939–1944” (1997), I argued that the FBI’s investigative efforts against anti-interventionists, in particular Charles Lindbergh, were greater than previous historians had argued. Then, in “Informing FDR: FBI Political Surveillance and the Isolationist-Interventionist Foreign Policy Debate, 1939–1945” (2000), I furthered my argument by examining the FBI’s monitoring of the America First Committee, Lindbergh, and five wiretap targets. I concluded that secret FBI political reports to the White House helped Roosevelt to advance his conception of the nation’s national security interests.²⁰ And in “Franklin D. Roosevelt, J. Edgar Hoover, and FBI Political Surveillance” (1999), I argued for a lay audience that it was Hoover and not Roosevelt who initiated FBI monitoring of anti-interventionists, yet Roosevelt had made no complaints. These early conclusions were limited and served as a basis on which this present study was launched. Some aspects of my early work are expanded upon herein and more closely scrutinized.²¹

Other studies deal with the FBI and political surveillance during this period in indirect ways. Roy Turnbaugh argued in “The FBI and Harry Elmer Barnes” (1980) that the bureau targeted the anti-interventionist Barnes in an effort to exact vengeance for critical comments the noted historian had made about the FBI prior to the Great Debate. He did not analyze the FBI’s monitoring of Barnes as part of a larger effort against anti-interventionists.²² Francis MacDonnell, in his book *Insidious Foes: Press,* *Journalism History* 19 (Spring 1993): 3–10.

²⁰ Warren Kimball was solicited to comment on my article for H-Diplo, the diplomatic history Internet discussion list. He praised my point that the origins of illegal surveillance for the White House date back to FDR and not Nixon. He criticized me, however, for not adequately proving my contention that FBI political reports permitted Roosevelt to not worry about his domestic opponents as he had kept tabs on them. I may have overstated my case, but I was also not clear in my argument. I should have stated that Roosevelt gathered sensitive political intelligence without his critics knowing about it, and this information, in part, allowed him to implement his conception of the country’s national security needs. Warren F. Kimball, Review of Douglas M. Charles, “Informing FDR” (19 April 2000), H-Diplo discussion list, http://www.h-net.msu.edu.


The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front (1995), analyzed the FBI’s activity during this period but only insofar as it related to the perceived Fifth Column threat. Barton Bernstein surveyed very briefly Roosevelt’s interest in FBI reports about his critics, but in the larger context of the abuse of executive authority dating from 1940. And John F. Berens noted Roosevelt’s empowerment of the FBI but overlooked its monitoring of anti-interventionists in his broad and concise survey article “The FBI and Civil Liberties from Franklin Roosevelt to Jimmy Carter—An Historical Overview” (1980).

This book further makes a contribution to the historiography, in terms of the FBI at least, surrounding the origins of the American national security state. If the national security state is defined as the country placing itself on a permanent wartime footing given global threats to national security (nuclear weapons, Cold War, terrorism) and the loss of geographic security (the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Pearl Harbor attack, and 9/11), the stepping stone to that was found during the prewar surveillance of, in part, the anti-interventionists. Moreover, the national security state can be understood, wrote Daniel Yergin, as “a unified pattern of attitudes, policies, and institutions.” While the attitudes and policies that made up what we would consider the national security state developed primarily with the onset of the Cold War from 1947 (containment and a belief that to secure the United States the country must be proactive internationally), the institutions—specifically the FBI—clearly began to develop a systematic security consciousness involving intelligence investigations against both radicals and legitimate foreign policy critics during the period before the American entrance into the Second World War. Even historian David Reynolds, in his important book From Munich to Pearl Harbor (2001), while not at all examining the FBI, does conclude that by “the end of 1941 many features of what would emerge as the ‘national security state’ were already apparent in embryo, albeit applied to a very different enemy.”

27. David Reynolds, From Munich to Pearl Harbor: Roosevelt’s America and the Origins of the Second World War (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 5. In terms of the embryonic aspects of the national security state, Reynolds identifies America’s “new global perspective on international
Therefore, I have termed this period the domestic security state—the point at which the FBI developed its domestic intelligence apparatus and international intelligence liaison to the degree that it operated semi-autonomously and was on a solid footing toward evolving into the later, Cold War–era national security state once the country adopted its Cold War attitudes and policies.

Whereas during the national security state era the FBI was part of, and concerned with, ensuring the nation’s security from communist subversion that was believed to be a global effort directed from Moscow, during the domestic security state period the FBI was more concerned with preserving the nation’s domestic security from perceived internal threats. Those threats were identified in fascist and communist “subversives,” but also, significantly, in legitimate foreign policy critics who were systematically monitored under a domestic security rationale. Even the FBI’s own jargon differentiated between the Great Debate period and the Cold War: during the former they investigated threats to “domestic security” while during the Cold War that changed to “national security.” But the pattern of FBI surveillance and its justification remained the same, while during the Cold War the bureau developed a greater degree of autonomy, more intrusive investigative techniques, and illegal disruption programs.

In his book *Shattered Peace* (1977), Daniel Yergin traced the origins of the national security state back to Woodrow Wilson and his conception of American internationalism. Yergin argued that American policy makers conceptualized security concerns at this time in light of a perceived expansionist and ideological Soviet Russia.²⁸ Frank J. Donner similarly identified the federalization of domestic intelligence in the First World War era and the period of the Russian Revolution. It was at this time, he argued, that the FBI involved itself in large-scale investigations of primarily left-wing dissenters, yet he argued that the national security state is best demonstrated during the Cold War. And Athan Theoharis has examined the national security state in terms of McCarthyism, dating its origins to the Cold War, which, he argued, along with President Truman’s rhetoric and poor leadership, permitted such abuses to be wrought. He furthered his argument in *Spying on Americans* (1978) where he argued that it was during the Cold War when the Congress deferred to the executive in matters of national security and tolerated secrecy as necessary to effect security policy.²⁹

relations” with a concomitant expansion of U.S. security in terms of geography and “the assertion of U.S. principles of liberal, capitalist democracy.”


This study hopes to complement the work of FBI, anti-interventionist, and national security historians by examining the FBI's political surveillance of Roosevelt's anti-interventionist foreign policy critics from 1939 to 1945. FBI political surveillance during this period was extensive, widespread, and sought to be responsive to Roosevelt's political interests. The extent of the bureau's efforts, moreover, closely mirrors later Cold War patterns of FBI behavior. This is significant inasmuch as previous historians have identified the national security state as being inextricably linked to fears of communist subversion and the spread of Bolshevism. This study, and contemporary events involving international terrorism, demonstrate that the national security state extends beyond national and international concerns with communism, even if communism was the primary focus of national security bureaucrats during the Cold War. The Great Debate illustrates well that most any perceived threat during a crisis period—whether fierce anti-interventionist opposition to foreign policy or acts of terrorism—that eventually lead policymakers to develop the attitudes, policies, and institutions consumed with security concerns would morph into the national security state.

The terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., on 11 September 2001 and subsequent government reaction have brought new significance to this study. In reaction to these events, in an effort to safeguard the nation from further terrorist incidents, the Bush administration sought to suspend investigative restrictions placed on the FBI in the 1970s. Following Hoover's death in 1972, and revelations of intrusive FBI domestic surveillance activities, FBI investigations were formally restricted to prevent the bureau from investigating politically oriented groups. Some in the Bush administration, however, believed these restrictions impeded FBI counterterrorism efforts by preventing the employment of undercover agents to monitor, without probable cause, religious and political groups.

Testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Attorney General John Ashcroft defended the Bush administration’s antiterrorism plan, which included a broad expansion of FBI wiretapping and investigative authority. He denied that American citizens’ civil liberties would be restricted but added: “To those [critics] who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of

lost liberty, my message is this: your tactics only aid terrorists for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve.”

While the attorney general might have claimed individual liberties would not be violated as in the past, the Bush administration’s “Patriot Act” has created the potential for the FBI to resume a political surveillance role. In the current atmosphere, past fears of the influence of “subversive activities” on American national security have been replaced with concerns over terrorist activities. With increased FBI investigative authority, and a concomitant increase in government secrecy (i.e., a tightening of FOIA standards, restrictions on access to presidential records, secret meetings with corporate executives to develop national policies, and the creation of secret NSA and CIA surveillance programs), a revival of the FBI’s interest in domestic political surveillance is possible if not probable. Indeed, by November 2003 the Congress sought to expand significantly FBI powers to examine financial records of various kinds without a judge’s approval. Also in that month, the New York Times reported that the FBI had begun to collect “extensive information on the tactics, training and organization of anti-war [Iraq War] demonstrators.” And by December the FBI had eliminated distinctions between criminal and intelligence investigation classifications.

By 2005, moreover, after the presidential election, the effort to increase the FBI’s unchecked freedom in conducting investigations grew. During May, Senate Republicans and the Bush administration advocated expanding FBI powers to permit agents “to subpoena records from businesses and other institutions without a judge’s sign-off if they declared the material was needed as part of a foreign intelligence investigation.” Later that year,


the *Washington Post* reported that the FBI had investigated “hundreds of potential violations related to its use of secret operations,” violations that were “largely hidden from public view.” More specifically, FBI agents conducted surveillance of U.S. residents for over a year “without proper paperwork or oversight.” As part of this effort, FBI agents seized e-mails and bank records without proper warrants and conducted at least one “unconsented physical search.” In response, FBI officials called the violations “administrative errors.”

In November of 2005, it was further reported that FBI agents were frequently using national security letters “to scrutinize U.S. residents and visitors who are not alleged to be terrorists or spies.” National security letters were an innovation of the 1970s to assist FBI agents in espionage and terrorism cases, but the PATRIOT Act and the Bush administration’s guidelines have extended their use. According to the *Washington Post*, FBI agents issue more than thirty thousand national security letters each year and none of them require the oversight of a judge and receive no external review afterward.

By December of 2005, it was also reported that someone in the FBI altered the dates on documents to cover up the employment of an illegal wiretap, and one agent was blackballed from undercover investigations after he criticized FBI violations internally. Later that month, it was further reported that FBI agents working in counterterrorism cases had monitored a “Vegan Community Project,” a Catholic Workers group, Greenpeace, and the animal advocacy group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Evidence advanced in this book demonstrates that the roots of such FBI activity are to be found during the anti-interventionist foreign policy debate when legitimate administration critics were regarded as witting or unwitting dupes of fascists and investigated under a domestic security classification. It was during this critical period (a time of international crisis) that FBI officials acquired increased investigative authority and resorted to sensitive investigative techniques, like wiretapping, and violated


investigative restrictions—all in the name of combating “subversive activity,” but too often, in reality, with the prime objective and end result being the monitoring of domestic political activity while violating the civil liberties of foreign policy critics.
A close examination of the FBI's surveillance of Charles Lindbergh; the America First Committee; Senators Burton Wheeler, Gerald Nye, and David Walsh; Congressman Hamilton Fish; those associated with the Victory Program investigation; the Brigham family; Harry Elmer Barnes; Laura Ingalls; and others confirms the underlying political nature of FBI officials' efforts. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover sought in each instance to cater to the Roosevelt administration's political and policy interests—that being to monitor the political activity of its anti-interventionist foreign policy critics and, if possible, to develop information that would discredit them. In the Ingalls case, for instance, even though FBI agents had a responsibility to investigate a true violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, underscoring their efforts was a desire to develop a successful prosecution of not an espionage agent but one of the president's foreign policy critics. FBI agents, moreover, went so far as to use illegal investigative techniques (wiretapping and illegal trespass) to develop information “most” of which was “not competent evidence” for trial. Further highlighting the political nature of this investigation is the fact that FBI officials did not seek a similar case against the interventionist Fight for Freedom Committee who, as Mark Lincoln Chadwin has shown, similarly violated the Foreign Agents Registration Act. The bureau’s concern with the administration's political interests is further underscored in the Victory Program leak investigation where FBI officials focused exclusively on anti-interventionist critics to satisfy the desires of some high-level administration officials to hold them responsible and to discredit their arguments.

FBI surveillance efforts against the anti-interventionists were widespread, thorough, and responsive to Roosevelt’s political interests. FBI agents employed the use of informers, illegal wiretaps, illegal trespass,
mail covers, official investigations; perused organizations’ private files; collected derogatory intelligence; provided public opinion leaders with FBI-obtained political intelligence (using blind memoranda); likely liaised with British intelligence about the anti-interventionists; and sought to develop cases against them that would have discredited their efforts in the courts. Hoover also recommended to his superiors the use of the grand jury that, despite its work being technically secret, would invariably draw public attention through leaks to create pressure that would serve to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the president’s critics.

The FBI’s surveillance was not limited or “never significantly mobilized” and President Roosevelt’s purposes were also not “essentially benevolent,” as previous studies indicated. Instead, they reflected an intensive FBI investigative effort and a callous disregard by Hoover and Roosevelt for his legitimate political opponents’ civil liberties. More specifically, one can chart the FBI’s efforts with the intensification of the foreign policy debate. During 1939 and 1940, FBI agents passively monitored anti-interventionist neutrality advocation. During the first half of 1941 and the lend-lease debate, that surveillance markedly intensified when critics directly criticized the president’s policies, including FBI efforts to develop information that had the potential to discredit Lindbergh and America First. But during the second half of 1941, when the Great Debate deadlocked, FBI agents focused on congressional anti-interventionists who were blocking Neutrality Act revision and on the AFC’s financial sources. But after the declaration of war, and into 1942, FBI efforts to develop prosecutions and use of illegal investigative techniques significantly expanded.

With war no longer on the horizon but a reality, the FBI reached the level of a domestic security state freely pursuing critics with less fear of backlash while few Americans dared critique government action to preserve security.

Taken as a whole, FBI surveillance during this period reveals a similar pattern of behavior that occurred during the Cold War (i.e., the use of illegal investigative techniques without approval, disseminating political intelligence to public opinion leaders, utilizing separate filing procedures to insulate the collection of sensitive information, and extensively monitoring White House critics under a security rationale). This pattern suggests that the bureau’s role and functioning as an institution of the national

security state can be dated not with the onset of the Cold War but to the period of the Great Debate.

In return for satisfying various administration political interests, Hoover, an archconservative in a liberal administration, not only preserved his bureaucratic position as FBI director but also obtained over time increased authority for his bureau. When Attorney General Cummings sought to publicize the crime issue during the early New Deal to ensure passage of his crime legislation, with Hoover’s enthusiastic assistance he was successful. Then, in 1934, Hoover responded to White House requests for information about the activities of fascist groups in America. By 1936, pleased with Hoover’s reports, President Roosevelt stepped up FBI efforts when he verbally authorized the bureau to investigate domestic fascist and communist movements. Hoover then sought and won in 1939 an executive order establishing the FBI as the sole domestic investigative agency. After the onset of the European War, in 1940, Roosevelt further increased FBI investigative authority by secretly authorizing the use of illegal wiretaps in national defense cases. Hoover subsequently exploited this executive directive to develop a not insignificant level of investigative autonomy for his FBI when the attorney general showed disinterest in monitoring wiretap usage. Amid all of this, Hoover also developed or revised special filing procedures that ensured the confidentiality of sensitive FBI operations and information. Yet it is an important distinction that all of this occurred during a period of international crisis that resulted in a charged political debate that permitted Hoover to cater to the administration’s political concerns.

An examination of the increasing number of FBI agents and the agency’s annual appropriations dating from 1934 further alludes to Hoover’s success in developing his FBI during this period. In 1934 the FBI employed 391 agents and a support staff of 451 and was appropriated $2,589,500. By 1936, the year Roosevelt increased FBI investigative authority to have it focus on intelligence investigations, the bureau had nearly doubled its agents to 609 with a support staff of 971. Its 1936 appropriation was $5,000,000. When the Great Debate began to dominate American politics by 1941, the FBI employed 1,596 agents and 2,677 support staff with a budget of $14,743,300; and in 1942 it employed 2,987 agents and 5,000 support personnel and had a budget of $24,965,000. To round off the increases, by the final year of the war (1945) the FBI had 4,370 agents, 7,422 support staff, and an appropriation of $44,197,146.²

The FBI’s secretive relationship with British intelligence also illustrates

the embryonic origins of the institutional side of the later national security state. A hallmark of the Second World War, Cold War, and War on Terrorism, the intimate intelligence relationship between the United States and Great Britain had its origins during the Great Debate. The FBI’s “special relationship” with British intelligence began in 1940 and increasingly became more intimate. And while we may not be able to definitively ascertain the precise scope and nature of the FBI’s relationship with British Security Coordination, both sought similar goals in regard to President Roosevelt’s anti-interventionist foreign policy critics. Together, with the FBI investigative tactics discussed previously, the bureau’s close liaison with foreign intelligence agencies (including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) further suggests (strongly) that the national security state’s origins can be dated to the pre–Second World War era.

Anti-interventionists suspected that FBI agents were monitoring their political activities, and while the bureau’s efforts ultimately failed to discredit them, it nevertheless created a certain chilling effect. Lindbergh believed that the FBI had wiretapped his telephone and, indeed, FBI agents collected information about the aviator indirectly from an illegal wiretap and shared it with the White House and the federal prosecutor who was to question, and perhaps discredit, Lindbergh before a grand jury. Additionally, Harry Elmer Barnes, Senator Wheeler, and Congressman Hamilton Fish all expressed concerns during the debate that civil liberties would suffer, while the America First Committee went so far as to obtain confirmation from Hoover that the FBI had in no manner collected intelligence on them through a wiretap. Yet FBI agents had, in fact, gathered “valuable” political intelligence about the group via the Brigham wiretap. FBI agents even collected information from an illegal wiretap and an illegal trespass of Laura Ingalls’s apartment, and other critical comments about the administration from a wiretap on Grunewald. John T. Flynn, of the New York branch of America First, moreover, feared Hoover’s FBI was akin to the Gestapo, and the anti-interventionist periodical Uncensored accused the FBI of monitoring legislators.


4. On anti-interventionist concerns about being monitored see Justus Doenecke, The
Roosevelt and senior administration officials found Hoover’s reports to be valuable. After receiving the first of Hoover’s political intelligence reports in 1940, Roosevelt thanked the FBI director in a personal letter. By late 1941, when the Great Debate became stalemated over neutrality revision, Roosevelt directed the attorney general to have the FBI investigate the money sources behind the America First Committee in the hopes that a grand jury probe would end the impasse. Senior administration officials also pressed for an FBI investigation of anti-interventionists in order to hold them responsible for the Victory Program leak. But most unsubtle was Interior Secretary Ickes’s use of FBI information—which had been developed unbeknownst to him partly through an illegal wiretap—in his critical book manuscript on Lindbergh. Clearly, senior administration officials found Hoover’s reports tantalizing and, in some instances, used this information.

This study, therefore, complements the work of historians who have examined the FBI, anti-interventionists, and the national security state. The FBI’s extensive political surveillance during the Great Debate can now be understood as part of the better-known history of the FBI’s political surveillance during both the Red Scare and Cold War periods. This book also adds to the work of historians of anti-interventionism who have neglected it due to a lack of documentation, research specialization, or historical focus. And while we might not be able to understand definitively how the administration might have used the information provided by Hoover, its interest is readily apparent. This study further broadens our appreciation of the national security state which has been analyzed in numerous ways. In terms of the FBI, it was the period of the Great Debate when, for the first time, the bureau extensively and systematically monitored administration critics while seeking to undermine them. The FBI’s methods are strikingly similar to those employed, though on a much larger scale, during the Cold War and beyond.

In sum, the FBI surveillance of Roosevelt’s anti-interventionist foreign policy critics denotes the origins of the Cold War FBI’s national security apparatus. For the first time the FBI extensively monitored an administration’s legitimate critics using a “domestic security” rationale while viewing them as “subversive” or “un-American” to become an intelligence arm of the White House. FBI officials, often using intrusive and illegal techniques,
Conclusion

recommended the indictment of these critics under the Smith Act, Foreign Agents Registration Act, Espionage Act, or conspiracy statutes, a tactic they would employ against domestic communists during the Cold War and eventually abandon with the advent of the COINTELPROs. These actions violated the civil liberties of law-abiding political opponents and contributed a chilling effect in important public debate over national policy. From these origins FBI Director Hoover was able to create in the FBI a more intrusive, powerful, and autonomous internal security agency during the Cold War. But while this evolution had its basis during the Great Debate, it was not a predetermined fact that the FBI would become the Cold War agency it did. Unique circumstances, such as Harry Truman’s ascendancy to the presidency and Hoover’s later misrepresentations of executive orders, during the Cold War era permitted Hoover to develop the FBI into a more intrusive and autonomous agency. Nevertheless, Hoover could not have accomplished this without the basis laid during the Great Debate.

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Bibliography


Dissertations


Bibliographic and Historiographical

Alien Deportation Act, 20
Alien Enemy Registration Section, 20.  
See also J. Edgar Hoover
America First Committee (AFC), 1, 4,  
5, 6, 41, 54, 60, 64, 65, 66, 70–72,  
79, 87, 92, 96, 100–101, 108, 120,  
126, 155, 165, 167, 170, 171, 172;  
alleged fascist links, 62, 80–81; and  
Brighams, 142, 143, 144, 145, 147,  
149, 152, 153; and British Security  
Coordination, 81–86; conservative  
nature of, 62, 82; FBI and, 66, 73;  
FBI investigates funding of, 68–69,  
78–79, 96–100; invites FBI check  
of files, 66–67; and Lindbergh, 63;  
objective of, 61, 63; origins of, 60,  
61; popular perceptions of, 62, 82;  
start of FBI surveillance, 63
Allen, George, 94
American Fellowship Forum, 46
American League for Peace and  
Democracy, 4
Anderson, H. Carl, 120
anti-interventionist press, 1, 9, 78  
anti-interventionists, 40; direct  
criticism of Roosevelt, 60;  
historiography, 8–13; as subversive,  
5–6
Arnold, Henry, 74, 130, 131n52
Auhagen, Friederich Ernst, 46
Barnes, Harry Elmer, 31, 68, 141,  
155–64, 156, 172, 174; and America  
First Committee, 155; background  
of, 155–56; books of, 155, 156,  
159–60, 162, 162–63; criticism of  
FBI, 157, 164; Office of Emergency  
Management, 163–64; and Poland,  
40
Barkley, Alben, 106
Beekman, Gustave, 106
Bennett, Harry, 128–29. See also  
Charles Lindbergh; Henry Ford
Bennett, Philip, 134
Berge, Wendell, 75, 103, 136, 160, 162,  
169
Berle, Adolf, 57, 112
Biddle, Francis, 70, 71, 97, 98, 103, 123,  
127, 129, 134, 136, 141, 143, 144,  
154, 160; and wiretaps, 150
Bonaparte, Charles, 18
Bonus March, 23–24
Borah, William, 43; death of, 47
Borchers, Hans, 167
Bowles, Chester, 67
Brigham family, 141, 142, 145, 149,  
151, 153; assassination threat,  
142, 143, 144; Barbara, 142;  
Constance, 142, 150; Daniel, 142;  
establishment of wiretap, 143, 150;  
Ethel, 142, 150; family of, 141–42;  
informant developed, 145; and  
Lindbergh, 145–48, 148; start of  
FBI surveillance of, 143. See also  
America First Committee
British intelligence, 2, 36, 55–58; FBI  
relations with, 2, 56, 72. See also  
British Security Coordination
British Security Coordination (BSC),  
56–58, 84, 175; and America First
Committee, 81–86; establishment of, 57–58; and FBI, 94; and Fish, 110; and Lindbergh, 82–83; and Nye, 85. See Also British intelligence
Brookhart, Smith, 48, 49
Burch, Frank, 97
Bureau of Identification, 26
Burns, William J., 22

Carll, S. E., 159–60. See also Harry Elmer Barnes
Carrel, Alexis, 77. See also Charles Lindbergh
Castle, William, 41, 64
Chicago Tribune, 40, 70, 78, 114, 115, 119, 120, 123, 130, 132, 136, 137
Churchill, Winston, 57, 59
COINTELPRO, 2, 177
Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, 60, 63
congressional franking controversy, 53–54, 91, 111; and America First Committee, 92–93; and British Security Coordination, 94–95; and Nye, 90–91; and Vierck, 92–94; and Wheeler, 87–90
Coolidge, Calvin, 3, 22
Corcoran, Thomas, 50, 51
Couch, M. Bertrand, 76
Cox, Oscar, 106
Crime Control Program, 9, 25, 26–28, 174
Cummings, Homer, 26, 27–28, 37
Curtis, Catherine, 166

Daugherty, Harry, 22
Dennett, Prescott, 92
Dennis, Lawrence, 141
Department of Justice, 17, 18, 48, 53, 54, 58, 99. See also Federal Bureau of Investigation; J. Edgar Hoover
Dillinger, John, 19, 27, 27n28
Division of Investigation, 26
domestic fascism, 30, 33–34
domestic security state, 12–13, 55–56, 140, 141, 151, 164, 176–77

Donovan, William, 103, 152
Dyer Act, 19, 27

Early, Stephen, 26, 44, 49, 68–69, 104, 123; requests for FBI investigation, 48, 49; on Victory Program investigation leak, 121
Eklund, Laurence C., 103–4
Ernst, Morris, 98–99, 105, 106
Espionage Act, 2, 20, 75, 103, 121, 136, 160, 171

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 3, 6; 1916 appropriations statute, 34, 37; and British Security Coordination, 56–57, 83; Clegg and Hince mission, 72–73; early history of, 17–24; filing procedures, 23, 52, 77, 91, 106, 151; and FOIA, 6–7; growth of, 174; historiography, 7–13, 173; and homosexuals, 106; and increased power, 4, 174; intelligence investigations, 34; Office of Price Management, 67; and Stephenson, 57; view of America First Committee, 62. See also J. Edgar Hoover
Fifth Column, 1, 33, 34, 36, 43, 98, 158, 169
Fight for Freedom Committee, 80, 84, 85, 86, 93, 120, 172
First World War, 19–20, 36
Fish, Hamilton, 53, 87, 90, 95, 108–110, 172, 174; background of, 107–8; and franking controversy, 92–94; and Poland, 40; and receipt of questionable money, 109–110, 110–112; as Roosevelt’s nemesis, 107; start of FBI surveillance, 108
Flynn, John T., 66, 85, 126, 175
Ford, Gerald, R., 60
Ford, Henry, 27, 27n28, 73, 115, 128–29. See also Charles Lindbergh
Foreign Agents Registration Act, 2, 2n1, 79, 84, 93, 98, 101, 103, 109, 111, 165, 167, 169, 170, 171, 172
Fox, Dixon, 163. See Also Harry Elmer Barnes
Foxworth, P. E., 144, 145, 148
Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 6–7

Garvan, Francis, 25
Genau, Joseph, 125, 126, 132
General Intelligence Division, 21
German American Bund, 30, 34, 54, 81
Gerow, Leonard, 118, 124
Gienanth, Baron Ulrich, 167, 168, 169
Glass, Carter, 120
Great Sedition Trial, 141, 171
Grunwald, Henry, 48–52; links to
Hoover, 50; and Nye, 48–49, 90–91; wiretap of, 50–52

Hansen-Sturm, G. T., 109, 110
Harding, Warren G., 22
Hatch, Carol, 88
Henning, Arthur, 133–34, 135, 136
Higgs, James, 129–30
Hill, George, 92, 95
Hoke, Henry, 53, 89, 95, 109, 110
Holt, Rush, 53
Holtzoff, Alexander, 47–48
Hoover, Herbert, 22, 23–24
Hoover, J. Edgar, 1, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 37, 48, 78, 98, 100, 101; and America First Committee, 62, 69–70; and Brighams, 144; catering to Roosevelt, 4, 5, 52, 58, 66, 69, 94, 114, 123, 140; and Ingalls, 166, 169; as interventionist, 5, 101; and lend-lease, 64–65; and Lindbergh, 75–76, 129; 1936 meeting with Roosevelt, 33–34; and political intelligence to the White House, 68, 69, 70, 103, 109, 112, 147, 149; pragmatism, 3, 4, 5; referring letters to Justice Department, 48, 54, 88; relationship with Roosevelt, 2, 3, 24–25, 55; Victory Program leak, 123, 125, 127, 129, 134–35, 136–37, 140; and

Wheeler, 88, 103, 105; wiretapping, 51, 151, 153
Hopkins, Harry, 72, 117, 151
Hull, Cordell, 30, 34

Ickes, Harold: and Lindbergh, 146, 146n13, 147–48; on Victory Program leak, 123
Immigration Bureau, 21
Ingalls, Laura, 141, 145–46, 164–71, 172, 174; background of, 164–65; custodial detention, 168; FBI trespass of, 168, 170; legal defense of, 169; start of FBI surveillance, 166; wiretap of, 168

Jackson, Robert, 50, 51
James True Associates, 46
Johnson Act, 33, 59
Johnson, Stanley, 136
Jones, Ellis O., 46, 160–61
Kahn, Albert E., 97—100
Knox, Frank, 48, 49, 52, 71, 103–4, 123
Kraus, Julia, 167, 169

Ladd, D. Milton, 50, 52, 104, 111, 150; wiretapping, 51
LaGuardia, Fiorello, 73
Lend-Lease, 59–60, 63, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 72, 87, 117, 128; and House of Representatives, 64; and Senate, 64, 69
Lindbergh, Charles, 1, 6, 66, 73, 100, 104, 107, 115, 154–55, 165, 166; alleged fascist links, 46–47; alleged Fifth Columnist, 43; alleged Nazi, 44; and America First Committee, 61, 65; FBI collection of derogatory information, 77–78, 174; FBI correspondence file, 43; and Ickes, 146–47; and Lend-Lease, 65; opposing Roosevelt, 41, 45–46, 65; and Poland, 40; racism of, 45; resignation from Army Air Corps Reserve, 65; and Rutherford
complaint, 74–76; start of FBI surveillance, 41–42, 44, 46–47; and Victory Program leak, 117, 126, 128–29, 134; and White House telegrams, 44; yellow peril remark, 146, 147
Longworth, Alice Roosevelt, 61
Ludlow, Louis, 35
Lundeen, Ernest, 53, 92

MacArthur, Douglas, 24
MacNider, Hanford, 64
Maloney, William, 93, 94, 95, 112
Manley, Chesly, 120, 121, 130, 131, 132–33, 134–35, 136
Mann Act, 19
Marsh, Henry, 50
Marshall, George, 116, 118
McCloy, John J., 121, 124
McCormick, Robert, 78, 114n1, 133
McDonald, Thomas C., 48, 49
McGuire, Matthew, 75, 90
McIntyre, Marvin, 106, 113
McWilliams, Joseph, 46
Military Intelligence Division, 48, 50, 75–76, 132, 147, 151, 158
Moley, Raymond, 30
Moody, Blair, 89
Morgan, Aubrey, 84
Morgenthau, Henry, 44, 49
Morosini, Emil, 145
Motor Vehicle Theft Act (Dyer Act), 19, 27
Murphy, Frank, 37

National Copperheads, 46
national security letters, 15
national security state, 2, 11–12, 55, 141
Neutrality Act, 32–33, 35, 40, 42, 43, 59, 73, 87, 96, 144, 172
New World Movement, 46
Nichols, Louis, 63, 68, 157–58; wiretapping, 51
Norris, George W., 115

Nye, Gerald, 29, 31, 53, 87, 90, 95, 172, 174; as alleged spy, 42, 47–49; and cash and carry, 42; and franking controversy, 90; start of FBI surveillance, 42; and Victory Program leak, 135. See also Henry Grunewald

One Gun Club, 143, 145, 148, 149, 150, 152, 154. See also Brigham family

Paget, Sir James, 56, 56n34
Palmer, A. Mitchell, 21, 22, 25
Patterson, Joseph, 78, 133
Patterson, Robert, 117
Pearson, Drew, 94
Pepper, Claude, 71
Pinkerton Act, 17
Progressive Era, 17, 24
Prohibition Bureaucracy, 26

Radical Bureaucracy, 21, 23
Roosevelt, Eleanor, 154–55
Roosevelt, Franklin D.: 1934 authorization, 31; 1936 authorization, 33–34, 174; biography, 28–29; and Fish, 107–108; and foreign policy, 29–30, 39–40, 59–60, 96, 140; and Neutrality Acts, 32–33; opinion of Wheeler, 64; and political surveillance, 3; quarantine speech, 35; relationship with Hoover, 3, 24–25, 45, 141; and requesting FBI information, 44, 68, 113, 109; sedition, 141; and Stephenson, 57; Victory Program leak, 114, 117, 121–22, 123, 138; view of Lindbergh, 44, 65; wiretapping directive, 50–51, 143
Roosevelt, Theodore, 17, 18, 24
Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), 55, 56, 174
Rumrich, Guenther, 36
Rutherford, Marvin, 74–76
Index

Sabotage!: The Secret War against America (Sayers and Khan), 97, 97n26

Sarles, Ruth, 120. See also America First Committee

Sayers, Michael, 97–100

Secret Service, 18, 31, 143, 144

sedition, 19, 140, 158, 159, 160, 161, 163

Sedition Act, 20, 162, 171

September 11 attacks, 13–16

Sherwood, Robert, 96

Smith Act, 2, 2n1, 46, 141, 160

Smith, Gerald, L. K., 46

Social Institutions (Barnes), 159, 162

Social Justice (Barnes), 162

Spanish Civil War, 33

Stephenson, William, 56–58, 83, 94, 137. See also British intelligence; British Security Coordination

Stimson, Henry, 44, 48, 89, 117, 119; on Victory Program leak, 120–21, 122, 123, 125, 133, 135

Stokes, Dillard, 93, 95

Stone, Harlan Fiske, 22, 23, 125

Tamm, Edward A., 63, 71, 99, 109–110, 123, 124–25, 134, 135; and Nye, 90

Thomsen, Hans, 167

Thorkelson, J., 53

Tolson, Clyde, 68, 89, 100, 200

Trohan, Walter, 116, 127, 131n52

Trujillo, Rafael, 111–12, 112n61

Tydings, Millard, 54

Van Dusen, Dr. Henry, 84

Victory Program, 136, 172, 176; and British Security Coordination, 137–38; publicized, 114–15, 123–24

Viereck, George Sylvester, 92–94, 95, 109, 111, 141, 159. See also congressional franking controversy

Villard, Oswald Garrison, 40

Völkercher Beobachter, 36, 108

Wallace, Henry, 123, 142

Walsh, David, 87, 105–106, 107; alleged homosexuality, 106

Walsh, Thomas, 22, 25–26, 130

Washington Times-Herald, 114, 119, 123, 130, 136, 137

Watson, Edwin, 26, 64, 100, 109, 113, 149

Webb, Mrs. Vanderbilt, 109

Webster, Edwin S., 146, 147

Wedemeyer, Albert C., 115; as anti-interventionist, 116–17; background of, 115–117; development of Victory Program, 118–19; on FBI investigation, 125–26, 128, 137; leak of Victory Program, 118–19; on Victory Program, 118. See also Victory Program

Welles, Sumner, 112

Wheeler, Burton K., 22, 25, 29, 53, 54, 70, 87, 95, 102–5, 107, 126, 172, 174; congressional frank, 54, 87–90, 92; criticism of FBI, 52–53; and Hoke, 89; and Hoover, 88, 105, 103; and Poland, 40; and Victory Program leak, 123, 130, 131–32, 137–38; view of Lend-Lease, 64

Wheeler, John, 67

Wheeler, Mrs. John, 67–68

White, William Allen, 60

White Slave Traffic Act (Mann Act), 19

Wiedemann, Fritz, 167

Wilson, Woodrow, 19, 29, 40

Winchell, Walter, 77

wiretapping, 15, 22, 49, 50, 100, 168, 172, 174, 176; Brigham wiretap, 143, 144, 145, 147, 148, 149, 150, 153–54; euphemisms for wiretaps, 144; and Supreme Court, 50

Wiseman, William, 56. See also British intelligence

Witherow, James, 47

Women United, 144

Wood, Robert, 64, 66, 70; on wiretaps, 153. See also America First Committee

Woodring, Henry, 48, 49