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Douglas M. Charles, *The FBI's Obscene File: J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau's Crusade against Smut* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012, \$24.95). Pp. x + 171. ISBN 978 0 7006 1825 5.

The dust jacket of Douglas M. Charles's book *The FBI's Obscene File: J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau's Crusade against Smut* reads, "What do pop artist Andy Warhol, sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, and cinematic comedians Abbott & Costello have in common? They all found a prominent place in the FBI's Obscene File." This is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's vast repository of "obscene" photographs, films, pamphlets, magazines, phonographic records, playing cards and cartoons collected for decades by bureau agents. Readers, however, should not expect this book to be full of illuminating stories of famous people targeted by the FBI on obscenity grounds. Charles's discussion of the bureau's scrutiny of Warhol, Kinsey, Abbot and Costello and other notables is fleeting. The book largely focusses on the creation, maintenance and utility of the Obscene File, and key court cases and legal decisions involving obscenity. Relying on redacted FBI memoranda (the obscene materials were themselves destroyed in the 1990s), Charles's book is really an administrative history of the Obscene File, framed by an analysis emphasizing J. Edgar Hoover's influential and underappreciated role in the national antiobscenity crusade.

While the bureau had been collecting smut since the 1920s, it was during the Second World War that the "Obscene File" became an official, centralized repository. Soon it overflowed with materials, as the FBI's effort to combat obscenity matched Americans' seemingly limitless appetite for smut. In tandem with conservative politicians and morality advocates, Hoover denounced the permissiveness of American society and associated pornography with social trends such as juvenile delinquency, sexual promiscuity and racial tension. The FBI monitored a range of materials, from garden-variety dirty photos and stag films to the Mattachine Society's homosexual rights advocacy magazine *One* and African American "race music." Hoover's FBI eagerly examined smut, loosely conceived. Even the Kingsmen's song "Louie Louie" was scrutinized after a listener contacted the bureau to condemn the song's lyrics – which few could decipher by ear – as sexually suggestive. Charles tracks the ways in which the FBI both responded to and shaped public opinion about smut. Via public information campaigns and support from politicians like Richard Nixon, Hoover turned obscenity into a national scourge to be combated by the FBI, which worked with local law enforcement to facilitate investigations and arrests. Prosecutions on obscenity grounds peaked in the 1950s.

Charles ably plots the turns that the antiobscenity crusade took as cultural currents shifted and the criteria by which materials could be legally deemed obscene changed, beginning in the late 1950s. While Nixon's opposition to the decadent "anything goes" culture of the 1960s helped secure his electoral base, the sexual revolution had unleashed forces that could hardly be contained. Thanks to the Supreme Court's increasingly pro-First Amendment rulings in the 1970s, prosecutions became more difficult to secure. Despite many legal efforts, antiobscenity forces could not prevent legions of Americans from seeing *Deep Throat*, the first widely popular porn film in the US, which the author discusses at length.

Charles is the first scholar to study the Obscene File, the remaining contents of which are redacted (and thus of limited utility, as he concedes). Charles stresses that

his book is not a comprehensive study of the FBI's antiobscenity efforts but rather a primer. The book lives up to that claim. It is slim – 140 pages of text – and while brevity is no sin, this book often reads like a hasty composition, and is sometimes filled in with excessive historical context of remote relevance to obscenity. For example, details about the unfolding investigation of accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss are recounted, yet issues and events more germane to the antiobscenity crusade are missing or glossed over. Charles might have instead highlighted the intersections of anticommunism and antiobscenity by noting, for example, the film that Charles Keating financed, *Perversion for Profit*, whose narrator warns viewers, using Hoover's rhetoric, that smut weakens Americans to the "masters of deceit" (communists), or anticommunist Roy Cohn's public attack on *Deep Throat* star Harry Reems (Hollywood rallied to Reems's defense). Moreover, Kinsey's "prominent place" in the Obscene File may escape readers, for the author offers scant evidence suggesting that the FBI ever truly monitored the Kinsey Institute or had anything more than a momentary interest in the institute's collection of erotica. One wonders what the hurry was to publish this book, as it could have been enriched by deeper and more patient research, analysis and editing.

Still, *The FBI's Obscene File* is a useful contribution to the scholarship on the FBI and American cultural, political and legal history. It may primarily interest specialists for whom information on the organization, analysis and deployment of materials in the Obscene File will have some special research utility.

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