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**Book Review: *The FBI's Obscene File: J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau's Crusade against Smut*, by Douglas M. Charles**

Clay Calvert

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or even an upset stomach as the real culprit. More often than not, it appears, the jury bought those excuses and they were acquitted, or at worst, let off with a small fine and a short period of imprisonment.

Not every time, though. Cressy gives us plenty examples of the grisly deaths of those convicted of treason, with the statutory penalty, at least into the early-eighteenth century, of being hanged, drawn and quartered (if the speaker was a man) or burned at the stake (if a woman). To contemporary readers, that might seem like harsh punishment for predicting that Henry VIII would “hang in Hell” for his dissolution of the monasteries, or labeling his daughter Elizabeth I “baseborn,” a whore, and a usurper who had deprived Mary Queen of Scots of her rightful throne, or calling Charles I “a great rogue.”

To those monarchs, though, what we might dismiss as mere rhetoric, opinion, or simple statements of fact justified swift retribution against those who dared to discuss the “qualities and failings of their rulers,” which were considered *arcana imperii*—state secrets. By the seventeenth century, it was well established that words alone, when not accompanied by deeds, could not be treason. But it took until 1977 for the Law Commission of England and Wales to conclude that there was no longer a need for the criminal offense of sedition at all. As Cressy points out, “The modern world appears menaced by different crimes of the tongue.”

Cressy’s book is well written and discusses the cases in chronological order, but he assumes a comprehensive knowledge of English history that will probably send many readers running to Wikipedia to track down references. And the exhaustive lists of miscreants who ran afoul of English sedition law become a little tedious when we read the umpteenth example of someone who got his ears cut off for calling the King “a turd.” The index is also less than ideal because it is primarily a list of the offenders by name—names that are not household words. And in some cases, frustratingly, we don’t even know what the actual words they spoke were because they were considered too scandalous to reproduce in court.

But reading *Dangerous Talk* against the backdrop of WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, and Anthony Weiner illustrates that the desire to comment on the government of the day is both universal and timeless. Cressy’s descriptions of people who faced the ultimate penalty for doing so remind us that when governments conduct mass surveillance and then punish mere speech, they usually end up looking ridiculous.

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***The FBI’s Obscene File: J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau’s Crusade against Smut.***

Douglas M. Charles. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012. 200 pp. \$24.95 hbk.

**Reviewed by:** Clay Calvert, *University of Florida, Gainesville, USA*

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Along with calls for repealing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, preserving marriage as the union of one man and one woman, and maintaining the death penalty option in capital murder cases, the 2012 Republican Platform included this

plank: "Current laws on all forms of pornography and obscenity need to be vigorously enforced." Indeed, in July of that year, the *Daily Caller* reported that a top adviser for Mitt Romney promised Patrick Trueman, current head of Morality in Media and former chief of the Justice Department's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, that if elected president, Romney would ramp up federal obscenity prosecutions after years of relaxed oversight.

If Romney had prevailed and, in turn, made good on his promise, it certainly would not have been the first time that politicians, moralists, and federal law enforcement officials triangulated around sexually explicit expression during times of sociocultural shifts. Douglas M. Charles makes that abundantly clear in his fascinating and well-written new book, *The FBI's Obscene File*.

Charles, an assistant professor of history at Pennsylvania State University who describes himself in the preface as "an FBI scholar," charts, in chronological fashion, a century of involvement and intervention by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with all varieties of sexual materials. These range from filthy images on playing cards to nudity in plays like *Oh! Calcutta* to sexual acts in movies like *Deep Throat* and even to the generally unintelligible lyrics of the Kingsman's song *Louie Louie*. Some of the more notable public figures who play prominent roles in *The FBI's Obscene File* include J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon, and Charles Keating, the last of whom gained widespread attention in the 1980s not for his assault on sexual content, but for his role in the Lincoln Savings and Loan Association scandal.

The centerpiece of the documentation from which Charles draws much of his material is the administrative portion of the FBI's Obscene File, which Charles obtained in redacted form via a Freedom of Information Act request. The other portion of the Obscene File, which was created in 1942 and eventually abandoned during the administration of President Bill Clinton and FBI head Louis Freeh, consisted of a vast library of sexually explicit material housed in the FBI's vaunted crime laboratory. The fact that the FBI possessed its very own large collection of pornography—it was so large that, on several occasions, parts of it had to be incinerated to make way for newer material—was always a source of potential embarrassment for the Bureau. One of the primary purposes of this collection of content was as a reference point against which to compare new specimens of obscene material to identify their sources.

But the Obscene File was often misused and abused over the years by the FBI, from cracking down on the music of African Americans during the 1940s—so-called "race music" featuring suggestive lyrics—to ferreting out gays in government service. Regarding the latter, Charles notes that in 1947, two Army intelligence officers photographed a gay bar in San Antonio, Texas, and those photos ultimately were incorporated into the Obscene File. The FBI also maintained a separate Sex Deviates File that was "used to purge homosexuals from government employment." It was, Charles writes, incinerated in 1977.

Another particularly interesting portion of the book concerns four extensive undercover operations, with code names such as Pornex (pornography extortion) and Miporn (Miami pornography), engaged in by the FBI during the 1970s and 1980s to target organized crime's links to the pornography industry. From a 2013 perspective, when

safeguarding national security against the omnipresent forces of homegrown and external terrorism is a top priority, the fact that the FBI once established bogus pornography businesses to go after the mob seems slightly ludicrous.

One aspect of the FBI's involvement with sexually explicit material that somewhat surprisingly is not addressed by Charles is the so-called 2257 Inspections conducted by agents in 2006 and 2007 during the administration of President George W. Bush. The inspections, which were carried out to ensure that all performers in adult movies were at least eighteen years of age as mandated by federal statute, took place mainly at adult movie companies operating in the greater Los Angeles area and in the state of Florida. Those inspections initially stunned the mainstream adult industry, as the rigorous age-verification and record-keeping provisions of 18 U.S.C. § 2257 had been in place for many years but had gone unenforced. What's more, as FBI Supervisory Special Agent Chuck Joyner told me during a June 2007 interview at the Bureau's Wilshire Boulevard offices in Los Angeles, the inspections marked the very first time the FBI had been involved in doing administrative regulatory inspections. But per the usual waxing and waning of crackdowns on sexual content that Charles eloquently elucidates in other areas of his book, the 2257 Inspections quickly faded when Barack Obama became president and different priorities took center stage.

Then again, Charles should not be faulted for failing to better explore how this aspect of the FBI's involvement with sexual content fits within his overall narrative. As Charles puts it in the introduction, his book "does not profess to be a definitive or comprehensive study of the FBI and obscenity" and, instead, serves "as a primer." As far as primers go, however, this one is well worth the read.

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**Women of the Washington Press: Politics, Prejudice, and Persistence.** Maurine Beasley. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012. 448 pp. \$29.95 pbk.

**Anonymous in Their Own Names: Doris E. Fleischman, Ruth Hale, and Jane Grant.** Susan Henry. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012. 304 pp. \$35 hbk.

**Reviewed by:** Jane Marcellus, *Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, USA*

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Are women in journalism today simply *journalists*—their identities unmodified by the marked language of "women journalists?" If so, does that mean women have been truly welcomed as more than tokens into a field that is still arguably male defined? Or does it mean that journalism has finally expanded its self-identity to embrace multiple gender perspectives?

Answering those questions is difficult without confronting essentialist notions of gender and the thorny issue of what comprises journalism in the Internet age. Yet the ways that women in journalism and related fields have negotiated professional identity in the past are equally complex. While some have sought inclusion in an existing