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# Queer Hoover: Sex, Lies, and Political History

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WHAT DOES THE HISTORY OF SEX look like without evidence of sexual identities or proof that sex acts occurred? And how might an analysis of gossip, rumors, and perhaps even lies about sex help us to write political history? Answers to these questions might begin with a story about J. Edgar Hoover told by society divorcee Susan Rosenstiel, a story that was bought and paid for by tabloid journalist Anthony Summers three decades after it allegedly occurred.

In 1958 the bisexual millionaire distiller and philanthropist Lewis Solon Rosenstiel asked Susan, his fourth wife, if—having been previously married to another bisexual man for nine years—she had ever seen “a homosexual orgy.” Although she had once surprised her sixty-eight-year-old husband in bed with his attorney, Roy Cohn, Susan told Summers that she had never before been invited to view sex between men. With her consent the couple went one day not long after this odd question to Manhattan’s Plaza Hotel. Cohn, a former aide to Senator Joseph McCarthy and a Republican power broker, met them at the door. As she and her husband entered the suite, Susan said, she recognized a third man: J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), whom she had met previously at her New York City Upper East Side townhouse. Hoover, Lewis had explained, gave him access to influential politicians; he returned these favors, in part, by paying the director’s gambling debts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This account is taken from Anthony Summers, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993), 253–55.

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Susan described what happened at this meeting. Cohn warned her that she should pretend not to recognize Hoover, who was in “full drag.” As she recalled, the legendary crime fighter, anti-Communist, and crusader against sexual perversion

was wearing a fluffy black dress, very fluffy, with flounces, and lace stockings, and high heels, and a black curly wig. He had make-up on, and false eyelashes. It was a very short skirt, and he was sitting there in the living room of the suite with his legs crossed. Roy introduced him to me as “Mary” and he replied, “Good evening,” brusque, like the first time I’d met him. It was obvious he wasn’t a woman, you could see where he’d shaved. It was Hoover. You’ve never seen anything like it. I couldn’t believe it, that I should see the head of the FBI dressed as a woman.

Two blonde boys then entered the “tremendous bedroom, with a bed like in Caesar’s time,” and the orgy began. Hoover removed his dress and underpants, revealing a garter belt, and the boys “work[ed] on him with their hands,” one wearing rubber gloves. Her husband, Lewis, then “got into the act” while Hoover and Cohn watched; finally, Cohn had “full sex” with each boy. Operating as a figure of power, not desire, Hoover demanded sexual pleasure but did not give it to others. Susan recalled that he “only had [the boys], you know, playing with him.” A year later the Rosenstiels returned to the Plaza. This time the boys were “dressed in leather,” and Hoover wore a red dress and a black feather boa. He had one boy read from the Bible while the other fondled him, again wearing gloves. Hoover soon “grabbed the Bible, threw it down, and told the second boy to join in the sex.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite her husband’s urging Susan Rosenstiel did not join either scene; her claim to truth rests on her status as a detached, female heterosexual among gay men. But this claim, after the fantastic quality of the story, is where the problems begin. For one thing, historians and respectable journalists usually rely on corroborated evidence. Furthermore, despite the fact that rumors of Hoover’s homosexuality had circulated in print from the moment he became director in 1926, there is reason to doubt Susan’s credibility and Summers’s use of her as a source. The facts of her life suggest that Susan, reduced to an impoverished old age, may have invented an outlandish tale in a search for revenge, profit, and fame.

In 2002 journalist Ronald Kessler summarized the doubts also raised by others when he noted that Hoover had provided damaging information about Susan during the Rosenstiels’ divorce in the late 1960s; that Susan had testified for the government against Lewis and his organized crime associates but had been convicted and served a prison term for perjury in 1971; and that her fall from wealth and status may have made her a willing accomplice to the lowest kind of journalism. When he found her living in a single-room-occupancy hotel in New York, Kessler wrote, Susan freely

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

admitted that Summers had paid for interviews and paid her again not to talk until his book was out. She had subsequently been paid by *Frontline* and the BBC to participate in television documentaries. “Like most journalists and news organizations,” Kessler commented, “I believe that paying for information calls into question its credibility.”<sup>3</sup>

Readers delighted in and (sometimes simultaneously) deplored Summers’s book, published in 1993 as *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*, which was best known—especially by those who never read it—for the image of J. Edgar Hoover in a dress. This story, as bizarre and homophobic as any description of the “homosexual lifestyle” circulated by modern American religious conservatives, has been characterized by Hoover experts as a classic smear. In two sexual encounters Susan claims to have observed transvestism, rubber and leather fetishes, age and power discrepancies, blasphemy, and voyeurism. The scenario is also suspicious for its heavy reliance on pre-Stonewall codes for male homosexuality: the camp name “Mary,” for example, and the assumption that a male homosexual must actually want to be a woman.

Some who viewed the story as false charged that liberals, having embraced gay rights, were stooping to hypocritical new lows in their efforts to discredit an icon of cold war conservatism. But as Frank Rich of the *New York Times* suggested in a 1993 essay that linked the furor over *Official and Confidential* to the furor over gays and lesbians in the military, the power of this story was not in its truth but in the unique way that gossip about public figures distills resentment. “There is no solid proof for the transvestism charges leveled against J. Edgar Hoover,” Rich wrote. “But we can dream, can’t we?”<sup>4</sup>

As Rich argued, Summers’s use of Susan’s story illustrated a new homophobia originating in the 1980s, a decade marked by militant queers and demands on politicians to address the AIDS crisis. Revelations of closeted homosexual identity functioned to reveal a political enemy as a pervert to some but, more important, to many more as a hypocrite whose self-hatred translated into policies that hurt lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) people. Several years before the publication of *Official and Confidential* what had already become known as “outing,” a practice associated primarily with gay journalist Michelangelo Signorile and *Outweek* magazine, had emerged as a way to deploy gossip about sexual identity as a political weapon that shamed the powerful but closeted. Even before outing, however, Hoover was a favorite target of the gay press. In a series of articles in the early 1980s gay journalists closely followed a discrimination lawsuit filed by a gay special agent, reported on illegal surveillance of gay and lesbian

<sup>3</sup>Ronald Kessler, *The Bureau: The Secret History of the FBI* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 108.

<sup>4</sup>“The Smearing Game,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1994; Frank Rich, “Men in Uniform,” *New York Times*, 11 April 1993.

groups uncovered by the ACLU, and printed a report that FBI agents had collected politicians' underwear for the director's blackmail files.<sup>5</sup>

Although many of these reports were initially only of interest to the gay community, they soon acquired a broader appeal. Mainstream politics itself changed dramatically in the 1980s as discourses of morality and sexual repression came to dominate a public sphere that was both newly hospitable and newly hostile to LGBTQ people.<sup>6</sup> By the 1990s and the Clinton presidency the repetition of sexual gossip had become a way of articulating political resentment. Two methodological questions in the history of sex and queer studies seem particularly vital for understanding this phenomenon in U.S. political history. In a discipline that offers accounts of "what happened," how ought historians to treat evidence about events that may be not factual, partially factual, or impossible to prove? And in the absence of proof, how do we account for the capacity of unfactual stories to tell otherwise unspeakable truths about political culture?

Susan Rosenstiel's story about J. Edgar Hoover provides an opening into a wider discussion about these questions, one that would take full account of what historians of sex and sexual communities have achieved in reshaping scholarship through activism. These scholars—who are often historians not only of political movements but also increasingly of institutional politics—have succeeded in teasing out facts about sexual identity from a welter of evidence designed to conceal. Unlike political historians, they have become experts in the use of repressed or recovered knowledge, untraditional sources, and rumors. In an early essay in lesbian history Martha Vicinus argued that "recognizing the power of not naming—of the unsaid—is a crucial means for understanding a past that is so dependent upon fragmentary evidence, gossip and suspicion."<sup>7</sup> Bringing these two practices together strikes me as particularly important, since we know that gossip and sexual innuendo had become an important form of politicized cultural knowledge at least by the early nineteenth century, long before sexologists invented either hetero- or homosexuality and substantially before

<sup>5</sup>For an account of the origins of and controversies surrounding outing see Michelangelo Signorile, "Gossip Watch," *Outweek*, 29 May 1991. For political deployment of outing against allegedly closeted gays and lesbians in the Bush and Clinton administrations see Signorile, "Making a List, Checking It Twice," *Advocate*, 30 June 1992, and "Outing Born Again," *Advocate*, 9 February 1993. For reports on the FBI in the gay press see *Christopher Street*, 7 December 1983; Scott P. Anderson, "ACLU Seeks Data about FBI Spying on Gays since 1950," *Advocate*, 6 March 1984; Matthew Stadler, *New York Native*, 24 September 1984; *Advocate*, 30 October 1984; Michael Balter, "Decades of FBI Surveillance Unveiled," *Advocate*, 11 December 1984. It is possible that the first published allegation of Hoover's homosexuality appeared in the late 1960s in Al Goldstein's sex tabloid, *Screw*; see Gay Talese, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 229.

<sup>6</sup>George Chauncey, *Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today's Debate over Gay Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 40–51.

<sup>7</sup>Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?" *Radical History Review* 60 (1994): 58.

the deployment of homophobia as a political and social weapon in the cold war United States.<sup>8</sup>

Historians like John D'Emilio, Lisa Duggan, George Chauncey, Siobhan Somerville, Jennifer Terry, and Allan Bérubé have noted that public knowledge about homosexuality was simultaneous with the rise of other regulatory institutions: the state, science, universities, and capitalism, to name but a few.<sup>9</sup> And yet, although homosexual acts had already become stigmatized in most parts of the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, the federal government's interest in regulating sexuality did not crystallize as a national security agenda until after the Second World War. One outcome of this interest was increased social homophobia and new criminal penalties for homosexual acts in the 1950s. Homophobia was also a more general feature of political culture, from the late New Deal onward. Conservatives like Hoover (even as he allegedly acted on his own homosexual and transvestite desires) specialized in spreading gay stories about political enemies such as Adlai Stevenson. The history of the Mattachine Society begins with Harry Hay's expulsion from the Communist Party of the United States, and, as Andrea Friedman argues, the fall of Joseph McCarthy hinged on liberals' use of homosexual gossip. Through insinuation, snide asides, and references to indecent secrets that could not possibly be printed journalists and politicians committed to defeating McCarthyism hinted at the "truth" about Republican corruption.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Marc Stein, "Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography," *GLQ* 11, no. 4 (2005): 605–25; Henry Abelove, *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). For the power of gossip in the nineteenth century see Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals and Politics in the Election of 1828," *Journal of American History* 80, no. 3 (1993): 890–918; and Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For the importance of rumor to economic life see Richard White, "Information, Markets and Corruption: Transcontinental Railroads in the Gilded Age," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (2003): 19–43.

<sup>9</sup>John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–16; Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine and Homosexuality in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Allan Bérubé, *Coming out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup>Chauncey, *Why Marriage*, 24–27; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 108–47; and David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For Hoover's use of gossip that Stevenson was well known by other prominent gay men in Illinois as "Adeline" see Athan

Mass culture often conveys truths that are not factual, which makes the controversy surrounding an otherwise insignificant book like Summers's *Official and Confidential* an excellent place to start. Historians caught in arguments about the merits of Susan Rosenstiel's story of closeted gay politicians may wish instead to consider another proposition: a queer Hoover whose role in twentieth-century U.S. history cannot be fully explained either by sexual identity or by his acts as director. When *Official and Confidential* was published in 1993 audiences for popular history had no trouble believing in Rosenstiel's story about Hoover, regardless of how many experts and former FBI officials denied it, in part because as a lifelong bachelor he was obviously *not normal*. For nonhistorians the revelations supported a larger "truth": powerful American politicians are often hypocritical, arrogant, and vulnerable, in control of others' lives while out of control in their own lives. Political gossip about such people in its most extreme form articulates conspiracy theories in which bizarre "facts" contradict each other with dizzying complexity.

A queer Hoover creates an opportunity to write history in which facts and truth are—and are not—at issue. As Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued, the central purpose of gossip is the exchange not of information or understanding but of "point of view." To underline this point, incredible as the Rosenstiel story often appears to historians and political journalists, it finds a diverse and welcoming audience among a national public schooled in American political scandals: COINTELPRO, Watergate, Iran-Contra, Tail Hook, and the Starr Report. A history of the twentieth-century United States that accounted for these and other political scandals might propose that corruption and illicit activities are typical of the modern state and that gossip and other degraded evidence provide increasingly useful knowledge about the state of political culture. This is not to say that gossip conveys factual truth but that it provides a narrative that enables its consumers to articulate unspeakable fantasies and irresolvable questions about power and politics.<sup>11</sup>

Modern political history needs to account for the power of political gossip and especially sexual gossip about politicians. This is particularly the case when such gossip persists—as it does in the case of Hoover's alleged gay life—in stabilizing incoherent identities. A queer rather than a straight or gay Hoover raises considerable anxiety.<sup>12</sup> The anxiety is not just about

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Theoharis, *Nation*, 7 May 1990. For liberals' use of the gay smear see Andrea Friedman, "The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip and Cold War Politics," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005): 1105–29, at 1107.

<sup>11</sup>Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 22; Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); and Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup>Martha Umphrey addresses a similar problem in "The Trouble with Harry Thaw," *Radi- cal History Review* 62 (1995): 8–23.

the interpretation of factual evidence that is credible or verifiable but about what historians actually can know, an idea explored in the first section of this essay. In the second section the responses that Hoover biographers and FBI historians have had to Susan Rosenstiel's allegations are contextualized. By centering the work of Athan Theoharis, a well-respected FBI scholar whose work has been foundational to the field, it becomes easy to see the limited impact that advances in the history of sexuality or queer theory have had on political history despite the fact that histories of LGBTQ politics have been widely available since the 1970s.

This problem is not limited to Theoharis's work, and he is only one example. More generally, when FBI experts address gossip about Hoover's homosexuality they reveal a kind of cognitive dissonance between what they "know" about J. Edgar Hoover and what the constraints of a political history walled off from the history of sexuality allow them to *say* they know. This final section addresses a paradoxical outcome of this problem, that is, the vigorous deployment of assumptions about power and sexuality presented as if they were facts. This "evidence" is intended to prove a narrow and perhaps truly irrelevant point: that regardless of his orientation, Hoover never performed sex acts. And yet by making these arguments historians create another kind of gossip.

Gossip is not true or false. Its function is to "fix" identities that refuse to stabilize themselves. Gossip should open rather than close historical investigation, a point emphasized by the fact that (to paraphrase Spacks) scholars demonstrate their attraction to it by going to great lengths to deny their interest in it.<sup>13</sup> Whether J. Edgar Hoover was a homosexual or not is not the point. The nature of the political structure that sheltered and used him is the point, and that is what gossip can begin to describe.

A vexed and vexing figure, Hoover might be provisionally described as a failed heterosexual whose known life contrasts sharply with the conventional gender ideologies he promoted and used to shape politics. Subjected to gossip, he also used it deftly to control others and to promote his own celebrity as a glamorous bachelor who dated starlets and society figures.<sup>14</sup> To some this act of deception is typical of closeted homosexuals and signals the fact of Hoover's homosexuality. To others, in particular family members and colleagues, it proves something quite different—that he had no sexual desires and wanted only to be "married" to the state. A queer narrative in which gossip is critical historical evidence about the tension between public political culture and private citizenship would suggest that both things may be true and yet neither factual. In this way Susan Rosenstiel's story and the

<sup>13</sup>Spacks, 59.

<sup>14</sup>Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Richard Gid Powers, "One G-Man's Family: Popular Entertainment Formulas and J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I.," *American Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1978): 471–92; and Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).



retelling of that story by her critics can help us articulate a queer method for integrating the histories of state, sex, and citizen into a synthetic political history of the postwar United States.<sup>15</sup>

#### SEXUAL IDENTITY AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH

Even before the publication of *Official and Confidential* few public figures were as well associated in the public mind with scandal as J. Edgar Hoover, a man whose politics were far more shameful than his sex life. Prominent examples in any assessment of his political career would include mention of his ongoing love affair with domestic surveillance, legal and illegal, and his failure to address either civil rights violations or syndicate crime until obliged to do so when Robert Kennedy became attorney general in 1961. Hoover's term as director began and ended in political corruption: he was appointed after the Teapot Dome scandal in 1926; he died in 1972 as the Watergate investigation gathered momentum and the Justice Department's role in the cover-up was becoming clear. Beginning with Fred Cook's *The FBI Nobody Knows* in 1964 and accelerating in the 1980s, critical accounts of his career produced a steady stream of revelations about his conservative policy agenda and his use of the FBI as a mechanism for perpetuating unethical or illegal political acts.<sup>16</sup>

Popular and scholarly accounts of Hoover's career, while written for different audiences, share a late cold war liberal preoccupation with the failures of American liberalism. Professional historians came somewhat late to this critical project, beginning to work seriously on the FBI after the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and several court orders began the declassification of the FBI's archive in the mid-1970s. These political historians drew heavily on a form of evidence that met conventional standards of scholarly proof: government documents. They also used less empirical forms of evidence more typical of cultural history: accounts of the FBI's activities from activists, journalists, memoirists, and popular writers as well as movies, television, and popular literature. Although these early studies were often more

<sup>15</sup>As Deborah Nelson argues, postwar U.S. political history is characterized by a central paradox: the collapse of privacy and insistent assertions of its desirability; see *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). For an overview of this period that makes this point specifically in relation to McCarthyism see Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998).

<sup>16</sup>Nelson Blackstock, *The FBI's War on Political Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); James Kirkpatrick Davis, *Assault on the Left: The FBI and the Sixties Anti-War Movement* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From Solo to Memphis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); Fred J. Cooke, *The FBI Nobody Knows* (New York: Macmillan, 1964); Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and His Secrets* (New York: Norton, 1991); Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: Free Press, 1987); and Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox, *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

detailed and complete than those of amateurs or former agents, historians' conclusions—that Hoover had sought to restrain or reverse the liberal social agenda—were very different from the pre-FOIA literature. All of these accounts were circumspect in their interpretation of rumors about Hoover's homosexuality, if they mentioned those rumors at all. In 1993 Summers's book and television specials drawn from it forced the issue into the open.

Both the book and the television specials used prominent historians as "talking heads," quoted at length, but the result was more like tabloid journalism than historical documentaries. Like the "tell-all" television talk show hosts who also dominate daytime television, Summers did not criticize Hoover for his homosexuality but rather for his dishonesty in concealing it. Organized crime flourished, he argued, because Hoover's shame was known to the underworld. "Until the Kennedy brothers attacked organized crime," Summers wrote, "[Mafia boss Meyer] Lansky bragged privately that Hoover had been 'fixed.'" In a 1996 special aired by the Arts and Entertainment Network (A&E), *J. Edgar Hoover: Private and Confidential*, Summers told a story from his book about Hoover and his associate director, Clyde Tolson, holding hands in a taxi. Bill Bonnano, son of crime boss Joseph "Joey Bananas" Bonnano, asserted later in the show that the family's lawyer (who was in fact Roy Cohn!) possessed pictures of a cross-dressed Hoover that protected his clients from federal investigations.<sup>17</sup>

Like Susan Rosenstiel, the A&E special relied on familiar homophobic "facts" about gay men, related by respectable people, to corroborate gossip that can only be traced to New York's criminal and homosexual underworlds. Hoover's sexual proclivities, Summers explained, were obvious even in childhood. Obsessed with order, he was "no athlete [and] . . . a failure with the girls . . . who made up for it with other accomplishments," such as by being a good student. Hoover "never brought a girl home to meet his domineering mother"; his father was "reclusive and played little role in his upbringing." Between interviews narrator Harry Smith—who was then the host of CBS's *Morning Show*, which lent him appeal and legitimacy—used the existing evidence to create personal qualities that characterized Hoover as effeminate: a "gossipy" child, Smith claimed, Hoover was "drawn to elite organizations of young men."<sup>18</sup> As an adult, Smith noted, Hoover saw a psychiatrist about a "dark secret of his own"—but Smith never said what that "secret" was. Similarly, during the program historian Richard Gid Powers described the Tolson friendship as having "the appearance of being some sort of male marriage."

<sup>17</sup>Joshua Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Summers, 13; quotations from the A&E special are from my own transcriptions. The blackmail theory has been widely repeated; it can be found in Diarmuid Jeffreys, *The Bureau: Inside the Modern FBI* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 84.

<sup>18</sup>For the historical association of gossip with women see Spacks, 38–46.

Hoover is so powerfully evoked not just as effeminate but as a closeted gay man in this production that even the protests from former Department of Justice colleagues and from Hoover's niece Dorothy Robinette—who maintained that “he was married to the FBI”—seem like only further proof that J. Edgar Hoover was very, very gay. Indeed, it is rare to encounter anyone—at a history convention or on the street—who does not believe that the director of the FBI was not sexually “normal,” that if he had sex it was with men, and that this “fact” has great bearing on his legacy at the FBI.

Whether Hoover actually lived a closeted homosexual life, had secret or suppressed heterosexual desires (witnesses have described a basement decorated with female pinups), was asexual, or was driven by complex needs that cannot be described through a hetero/homo binary ought to remain open and perhaps unknowable possibilities. What needs to be stressed, however, is that this gossip is in part believable because perverted sex is a constant theme bordering on obsession in Hoover's own writing about criminals, Communists, and social equality movements. If his personal sex life is poorly documented, evidence that he disliked and distrusted what he perceived as sexual deviance is ample. He believed all criminals were sexual perverts. He loathed interracial sex and the communal sexual practices on the left and in the civil rights movement. From early on he culled pornography from surveillance dossiers and kept it in his private files, he used sexual evidence to intimidate political opponents, and he displayed a visceral, public hatred for women whose actions or beliefs he saw as undermining a national security agenda: women such as the alleged crime gang leader Kate “Ma” Barker, the anarchist Emma Goldman, and the convicted Soviet spy Ethel Rosenberg. Hoover's closet bulged with secrets that went well beyond the sexual: political deal making, accepting personal loans, gambling—what journalist Diarmuid Jeffreys (to name only one author) has characterized as “moral hypocrisy—his petty corruption, his public expressions of outrage at the peccadilloes of others . . . while apparently concealing his own private practices of those same activities.”<sup>19</sup>

What the popular and scholarly accounts should tell us almost a quarter century after Hoover's death is that no one needs to “out” him as a homosexual or demonstrate absolute proof that he cross-dressed or performed particular sexual acts to know that he was not just a failed heterosexual but a sexually obsessed political figure.

So how might we use this insight to ask the new questions that would give us a usable history of J. Edgar Hoover and the political period he dominated? It is first necessary to reshape the sterile debate about identity inherent in the question, Was Hoover gay? Instead, we should ask, How do we read the queer evidence left behind by this influential political figure?

<sup>19</sup>Jeffreys, 67.

Addressing this problem clarifies how a methodology derived from queer studies that looks at evidence not from the perspective of consistency but from the vantage point of dissonance, repression, stigma, perversion, and inversion might represent an important intervention in political history. Such an intervention would go beyond the understandable (but perhaps antiquarian) desire to uncover prominent homosexuals and instead look at accusations of homosexuality as a related but separate phenomenon. It would also use what we already know about the emergence of sexuality as a theme in politics to make a larger argument about the articulation of state interests through discourses of sexual citizenship.

This new question would ask political historians to acknowledge what historians of sex now usually take for granted: that in investigating a closeted homosexual it is the closet as much as the “homosexual” that needs to be historicized.<sup>20</sup> It would note that sexual desire is far more contingent and confusing than an emphasis on twentieth-century identity categories permits; and it would recognize that the meaning of sex and the significance of sexual relationships that appear to be similar in fact change across time, race, space, and class.<sup>21</sup> Any sense of sexual self Hoover might have had would thus be complicated by changing ideas about masculinity, male sexuality, race, class, national identity, and the right to privacy over fifty years of government service and seven decades of life.

For example, when I write about Hoover as a “failed heterosexual” I am taking seriously that there are no assertions of any heterosexual acts that have emerged since his death and that throughout his life he called himself a bachelor, a status that may have helped him deflect questions about sex but also left him vulnerable to stigma. Bachelors, as Howard Chudacoff has argued, have been on the margins of respectability over the course of the twentieth century, as state, society, and church repeatedly sought to consolidate the family as the foundation for social order. Domesticity took on new cultural meanings in the second half of the twentieth century as a form of personal achievement that complemented its economic advantages and that stigmatized men and women who did not marry.<sup>22</sup> The cold war also saw the rise of rebellious male heterosexualities that deployed that stigma

<sup>20</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and David Harley Serlin, “Christine Jorgenson and the Cold War Closet,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): 139.

<sup>21</sup>Renee Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup>Howard P. Chudacoff, *Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Elaine May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

as a sign of excessive, rather than insufficient, masculinity in the form of the “Playboy bachelor” and Hollywood’s Rat Pack, a style Hoover mimicked with his nightclubbing, gambling, and appearances in gossip columns. And yet it is irrefutably the case that some bachelors were obviously, relentlessly heterosexual. Hugh Hefner had the Bunnies. Frank Sinatra had Ava Gardner (and Liz Taylor and Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe and Lauren Bacall and Mia Farrow and many others). What name was ever seriously linked with Hoover but Clyde “Junior” Tolson?

Was Hoover ever loved sexually by a peer, someone he loved and desired in return? No one knows. The director had a string of handsome male companions and settled on Tolson in the 1930s. One might presume a love between them, as most historians have, but did they have sex? And if they did not have sex, can they have been homosexuals? Evidence about specific acts might settle this question for some people, but if that evidence were to be found, if he could be “proved” to have been a “homosexual,” then how would “homosexuals” have to revise their historical narrative to take account of him? Associating Hoover with the closet through gossip might be seen as an important political strategy for a national LGBTQ liberal community that articulates its history as progress toward full citizenship based on shared sexual identities that are, as Michael Warner notes, increasingly disconnected from “sexual acts and their shame.”<sup>23</sup> Yet liberationist politics also obscure the possibility that many insist upon: that Hoover was a homosexual without sex. Whether one can be a homosexual without sex is an interesting question: it is implicit in the mantra of some religious thinkers, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” as well as in the Clinton administration’s “Don’t ask, don’t tell” military policy.<sup>24</sup> Articulating Hoover as queer, although it forces us to expand that category beyond its current ownership by the Left, might lead us to take a closer look at asexuality as an historical category that makes sense of some lives, even though it does not lend itself to identification or to a politics of sex.

It is, in fact, this unsexed homosexual who appears consistently in the scholarly biographies that take the evidence of those closest to Hoover most seriously. For example, already in 1987 Powers pointed to Hoover’s “straitlaced Presbyterian upbringing and his almost fanatical conventionality” to argue that the relationship with Tolson may have been loving but not sexual. “Yet human sexual drives being what they are,” Powers retreats, “it is also possible that it was a fully sexual relationship. There is no compelling evidence for a definitive judgment in either direction.

<sup>23</sup>Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 31; see also Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup>Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Janet E. Halley, *Don’t Tell: A Reader’s Guide to the Military’s Anti-Gay Policy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

Weighing all known information, such a term as ‘spousal relationship’ describes most fairly what is known about the bonds between the two men, bonds that grew stronger and more exclusive with the passing years.” In a subsequent book published after the Rosenstiel revelations Powers amended this to exclude *heterosexuality* as a possibility, saying that archival photographs of Tolson in his pajamas are a compelling statement about Hoover’s sexuality. “Most men,” he concludes, “would find it an inexcusable invasion of privacy to have another man photograph him while asleep—unless there were a relationship more intimate than a conventional male friendship.”<sup>25</sup>

Biographers Athan Theoharis and John Stuart Cox argued less ambiguously in 1988 that despite Hoover’s “overriding preference for male companionship” he was not a sexual person. They drew on niece Margaret Hoover’s observation that her uncle saw marriage as a distraction from his career. Indeed, this explanation is so ubiquitous among family members that we have to imagine that they gossiped about him too. Theoharis and Cox then argue, in contrast to Powers, that Hoover’s failure to act on his sexual desires made him into “what the clinical literature calls a ‘defended person’” who diverted this unused and unsatisfied sexual desire into his work. His perversions of state power were, therefore, a visible manifestation of closeted homosexual fantasies. “The entire structure of his life,” they write, was “designed to hide his own unacceptable impulses and turn them into external threats.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Hoover’s sexual acts took the form of political acts.

This deductive process appears to table the question of Hoover’s homosexual identity but instead confirms it. The authors fail to give adequate weight to evidence from Hoover family members that he was a bachelor, for example, a status that he would have shared with prominent postwar politicians such as Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and Senate Majority Leader Richard Russell (both of whom had intimate, loving relationships with the young Lyndon Baines Johnson that have been documented by biographer Robert Caro).<sup>27</sup> In this way, even as Powers, Theoharis, and Cox distance themselves from gossip by refusing to state Hoover’s homosexuality as “fact,” they cannot keep from insinuating it, since Hoover was not actively heterosexual. This sidestepping tells us little about Hoover’s identity and more about the limited usefulness of identity categories if hetero- and homosexuality (or even bisexuality) are the only choices. In the end, speculations that emphasize identity but avoid making conclusions about it are quite similar to the snickering newspaper gossip of the

<sup>25</sup>Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, 172–73, and *Broken: The Troubled Past and the Uncertain Future of the FBI* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 241–42.

<sup>26</sup>Theoharis and Cox, 39, 47.

<sup>27</sup>Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), and *Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002); Chudacoff, 4.

1920s and 1930s that advertised the director's attendance at "antique shows" and a "lightness in his step" as he made his daily rounds.<sup>28</sup>

It strikes me as significant that such gossip items stopped appearing after Hoover's spectacular successes against bandit gangs in 1934 and 1935. They only become visible to historians again because, as early as 1943, Hoover began to use FBI agents systematically to repress those who gossiped in casual conversation about his alleged homosexuality.<sup>29</sup> In 1951, at the request of several federal agencies, Hoover devised the Sex Deviates program, which sought to identify gays and lesbians working in government. This function was expanded in 1953 after a presidential order by Dwight Eisenhower made federal employment of homosexuals illegal. Simultaneously, the popularization of psychological ideas about homosexuality made it seem more visible than it ever had been. Thousands of soldiers, many of them combat veterans, were drummed out of the military by psychiatrists beginning in 1943. Their dishonorable discharges made many homosexuals unemployable and ineligible for the government benefits that expanded the middle class after World War II even while it emphasized their presence in society. Simultaneously, the 1948 Kinsey Report challenged sexual binarism with data demonstrating some homosexual activity among a considerable number of men. Instead of normalizing homosexuality, though, Kinsey's research may have helped to persuade cold war employers that they required more elaborate surveillance and that any information that helped to uncover homosexuals "masquerading" as heterosexuals should be used.<sup>30</sup>

Together, these circumstances suggest that gossip was an important source of information for the cold war surveillance state. Homosexual acts themselves, although they sometimes became part of an investigative dossier, did not have to be proven for a government worker to be identified as a security risk. Like the information about subversive connections collected by the FBI and investigators for the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), gossip was an important form of information when special agents investigated someone. Socializing or associating with suspect persons also formed part of most investigations; as late as 24 June 1969 President Nixon's aide H. R. Haldeman noted in his diary what was likely a regular occurrence: "Hoover . . . reported to [Attorney General John] Mitchell that columnist Drew Pearson had a report that [John] Erlichman, [Dwight] Chapin, and I

<sup>28</sup>Oddly, these gossip items are preserved in a collection of newspaper clippings Hoover kept himself; see J. Edgar Hoover Scrapbooks, RG 65, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>29</sup>Athan Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime: An Historical Antidote* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dec, 1995), 34–35; see also Kessler, *The Bureau*, 98–99.

<sup>30</sup>Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime*, 103–8; Bérubé, 149–76; Margot Canaday, "Finding the Lesbian in the State," paper presented on 3 June 2005 at the Thirteenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Scripps College; Terry, 296–314; Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997) and "Cold War Femme: Lesbian Visibility in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve*," *GLQ* 11, no. 1 (2005): 1–22.

had attended homosexual parties at a local Washington hotel. Pearson was checking before running the story . . . [and so] at Mitchell's suggestion, we agreed to be deposed by the FBI to clear this up."<sup>31</sup>

Taking gossip seriously might then permit us to historicize homophobia as a form of knowledge that is not about LGBTQ people at all. Rather, it needs to be read for the stories it tells about power in a language borrowed from gender and sexuality. For example, it is significant that Rosenstiel waited until the late 1980s to tell what is—whether true or false—a deeply homophobic story about events that allegedly occurred in the 1950s: even fear of retaliation does not explain this long delay, since Hoover died in 1972. So how might we read this story if we read it as an allegory about power at the end of the cold war?

We would have to begin, as Frank Rich suggested in his editorial comment on *Official and Confidential*, by foregrounding the changing political role of homophobia. In a post-gay liberation, post-AIDS era, closeted homosexuals are still viewed as dangerous and deadly, much as they were in cold war popular culture. But now that view is held mostly by openly LGBTQ people. Arguably, conservatives are far more tolerant toward the gay and lesbian people in their midst who choose not to come out of the closet. For this reason and others, modern queer activism organized initially around a life-or-death AIDS struggle and borrowing from psychological notions of projection have succeeded in articulating a powerful citizen's public embrace of homophobia as evidence that permits the rest of us to identify self-hating homosexuals. Thus, by the late 1980s Hoover could not avoid being articulated as a closeted gay man *because* he persecuted and reviled other homosexuals. Regardless of the source, gossip that protected him and gossip that threatened him always return to a story about power. Gossip supports an unspoken understanding of how powerful men protect their privacy: in Hoover's case it meant female "beards" at social events, hints dropped by his secretary Helen Gandy that she had once dated her boss, and gossip column items planted by Walter Winchell in the 1950s that linked Hoover to actresses and prominent Florida widows. The Rosenstiel gossip, on the other hand, operates as an allegory for the decline and fall of an imperial state: remember that Susan emphasized that the orgiastic display took place in "a bed, like in Caesar's time." As Douglas Crimp has observed about Roy Cohn, the only thing this story tells us about Hoover is not his sexual identity but that he was an "evil homosexual who lied about everything; . . . the revelation is that homosexuals are liars and traitors."<sup>32</sup> The homophobic story does not lead back to Hoover but only to homophobia.

<sup>31</sup>H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 66.

<sup>32</sup>Michelangelo Signorile, *Sex, the Media and the Closets of Power* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Douglas Crimp, "Right on, Girlfriend!" in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota



What the evidence suggests is that every history of J. Edgar Hoover needs to address not the truth or falsehood of the gossip about him but the queer significance of his life. Hoover's private self has become an object of scrutiny because it is increasingly difficult, as historians or as twenty-first-century Americans, to believe that the boundaries between public and private are meaningful. Because of this shift in perspective, Hoover is understood not just as the greatest policeman of all time but also as the greatest cold war security risk. His devotion to his mother is evidence not simply of an equal devotion to the state, as his relatives claimed, but of a failure of his masculinity and thus of his incapacity to perform the important patriarchal task that government became as the postwar state took on new global and domestic responsibilities.<sup>33</sup>

If a gay Hoover cannot tolerate ambiguity and contradiction, though, a queer Hoover invites them. He allows us to look beyond "normal" political discourse to probe the interdependence of political and cultural knowledge about the nation that takes shape in the queer gossip about him. It allows us to take insinuation and metaphor seriously, seeing Hoover both as author and subject of classic homophobic subtexts. As Philip Wylie charged in *Generation of Vipers*, published in 1942, sons who were raised by dominant mothers in the actual or virtual absence of fathers did not achieve the maturity required to reproduce the nation. Instead, fatherless men like Hoover avidly sought their own lost masculinity in other male "friends" who—as my mother and her neighbors would gossip in the 1960s, squinting meaningfully through wreaths of cigarette smoke—"had a mother."<sup>34</sup>

I propose that we historians shift our attention away from defining Hoover's sexual identity and resist questions about evidence we don't have. We do not have facts about Hoover's sex life, but we do have evidence in the gossip about Hoover's sex life. Such evidence might be usefully tied to current discussions about the relationship between myth and national history. It would further investigate the intellectual and political stakes in connecting Hoover to or distancing him from particular sex acts and

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Press, 1993), 307–8. For an illustration of Crimp's point see two texts as different as Nicholas von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) and Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1993–94).

<sup>33</sup>For the rise of a paternal state during the New Deal see Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); for its late-twentieth-century outcome see Sarah Benet-Weiser, "Elian Gonzalez and 'The Purpose of America': Nation, Family and the Child-Citizen," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2003): 149–78.

<sup>34</sup>Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942). Wylie's argument, made during World War II, was central to cold war texts such as Richard Condon's satirical novel *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959; New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1987) and movies such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (prod. Warner Brothers, dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955) and *Mildred Pierce* (prod. Warner Brothers, dir. Michael Curtiz, 1945).

identities. It would necessarily expand the field of political history to take account not just of facts but also of representations of fact that articulate changes in political culture.<sup>35</sup> Understanding Hoover as a queer figure in the histories we write rather than as a contradictory gay figure in history would also allow us to step away from the unproductive question of who “counts” as a homosexual and allow us to address the cultural compulsion to “count”—or discount—homosexuals.

#### THE EVIDENCE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

The larger historical project that I propose would attribute significance beyond the question of sexual identity to the ubiquitous gossipy evidence about Hoover: “Junior” Tolson wearing pajamas in Hoover’s home and the pair seen holding hands in cabs or whispering intimately in nightclubs. It would consider the forms of intellectual shame that make ambiguous evidence about sex difficult for political historians to use. As I have pointed out, political history and the history of sexuality in the postwar United States have significant overlaps that political historians have yet to take full advantage of. Furthermore, the increase in disturbing political facts about the cold war that illustrate antidemocratic impulses in American political culture like those abetted and enforced by Hoover requires scholars to deal with shame about the national past. That shame is not unlike the shame of uncovered illicit sex.

Many historians of the FBI have been liberal or radical scholars who participate in an intellectualism inspired by the New Left social movements that Hoover worked hard to suppress. Direct connections to activism have faded over time to the extent that historical questions that provoke national shame can no longer be dismissed as purely ideological, as they often were in the 1960s and 1970s. The kinds of secrets Hoover kept on behalf of the state have been revealed in declassified U.S. archives or newly opened Eastern European archives, allowing historians to answer questions that had previously been matters of speculation or gossip. Was Julius Rosenberg a Soviet agent? Were East German female athletes given masculinizing drugs to win Olympic medals? (Yes and yes.) Ironically, this flood of new evidence has also exposed the weaknesses of historical facts as instruments that reveal new or better truths. As one historian of foreign policy has pointed out, in many cases declassification has confirmed hypotheses without producing new interpretations or even resolving old disagreements.<sup>36</sup>

The Susan Rosenstiel story and the responses to it should caution

<sup>35</sup>Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory on the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 18.

<sup>36</sup>See Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Cold War: What Do ‘We Now Know?’” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (1999): 501–24.

those who hope that even respectable evidence about Hoover's personal life might answer questions about either his sexual identity or the motivations behind his work. That respectable archive, thin as it may be, exists in family testimony. It has not diminished the seductive explanatory power or the ubiquity of unproven sexual gossip. Close colleagues have also added to this archive, for example, proposing reasons other than sexual blackmail for Hoover's unwillingness to address organized crime. Former Assistant Director Cartha de Loach believed that his boss had a "profound contempt for the criminal mind . . . [that] persuaded him that no such complex national criminal organization [as the Mafia] could exist without him knowing about it."<sup>37</sup> For those historians who feel they understand Hoover's personality well this explanation is quite plausible, as is the explanation I have proposed elsewhere for Hoover's focus on bandit crime rather than criminal syndicates: organized crime was far too implicated in urban political machines, so he could not challenge it without also challenging powerful political patrons.

None of this information proves that Hoover was *not* blackmailed by the mob or that he was not a homosexual and a transvestite but only that the two issues may not be connected. There is also no proof that Susan Rosenstiel lied about Hoover, only evidence that she is the kind of person who might have lied. When contacted ten years later by Kessler, who promised that she would be famous again if she admitted that "she made up the cross dressing story, she insisted 'It did happen.'" While Kessler finds the story to be "outlandish," that the postwar rumors were probably generated by one of Hoover's political enemies in the CIA, and that "Hoover . . . simply could not have engaged in such activity at the Plaza, with a number of witnesses present, without having it leak out," he also cites the very respectable assertion by Elliot Roosevelt (son of President Franklin D. and Eleanor) that his father knew about Hoover's homosexuality in the 1930s but did not feel it was "grounds for removing him [from his directorship of the FBI] . . . so long as his abilities were not impaired."<sup>38</sup> Like Powers and Theoharis, Kessler simultaneously asserts and denies Hoover's homosexuality. While Roosevelt's recollection of his father's having heard and believed gossip about Hoover's homosexuality goes unchallenged, Rosenstiel's claim to direct observation is dismissed.

Although oral evidence is critical to modern historical methods, most other historians since the publication of *Official and Confidential* also found reasons to disbelieve it, some because Summers was a sensational journalist and thus the opposite of a respectable historian, some because the evidence could not be corroborated, and some because the interview was so tawdry they believe it should not have been used even if true. In my

<sup>37</sup>Quoted in R. J. Stove, "J. Edgar Hoover's Final Years: 1960–72," *National Observer: Australia and World Affairs* (Spring 2001): 37.

<sup>38</sup>Kessler, *The Bureau*, 108–11, 43.

view, Rosenstiel's determination to stick by her story should cause us to ask whether some version of it really occurred. But there is another question that leads us back to the historical profession and its practices: if she was lying, if she was only elaborating on overheard gossip, why did her story generate another phase in the debate about ethical historical practices and the sexual closet? Why did this gossip cause such consternation among political historians? And why did it provoke Athan Theoharis, a distinguished historian in the field, to a lengthy effort to disprove it?

To address these questions we must situate them not in the cold war, when the episode allegedly occurred, but in the changed terrain of discourse about the public and private spheres since the election of Ronald Reagan as president. The emergence in the Republican Party and in the American political scene of evangelical conservatives who advocate the containment of sex within marriage as one of the baselines for good citizenship meant that in the 1980s shame became an important weapon in a so-called culture war that has moved sexuality and morality to the center of politics. Sexual scandals of any sort, even a brief view of Janet Jackson's breast during halftime of the 2004 Super Bowl, trigger national conversations about the importance of shame in regulating public morals.<sup>39</sup>

This late-twentieth-century context intentionally puts politics and culture in conversation with each other and makes sexual politics increasingly difficult to separate from what used to be just called "politics." As feminist scholar Nancy Fraser has observed, accusations of lewd behavior made by Anita Hill against Clarence Thomas during nationally televised confirmation hearings were not just "another case of the American obsession with the private lives of public figures" but a new kind of political event that is "a rare exercise in democratic publicity, a national teach-in on sexual harassment."<sup>40</sup> Journalist Christopher Hitchens has argued similarly that Bill Clinton's dishonesty about his extramarital affairs was "indissolubly related" to his "cowardice and conservatism" as a policy maker.<sup>41</sup>

Both Fraser and Hitchens make the point that the "facts" in each case are less significant than the process of allegation and rebuttal through which sexual and political behaviors become linked. This shift of private morality to the center of public discourse has already placed new demands on politi-

<sup>39</sup>See Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (New York: Little, Brown, 1995); and James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>40</sup>Nancy Fraser, "Sex, Lies and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 595–612.

<sup>41</sup>Christopher Hitchens, *No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family* (New York: Verso Press, 1999), 1; see also Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Books, 2004); Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Lisa Duggan and Lauren Berlant, eds., *Our Monica Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

cal historians to take account of public figures' sexual histories. Many of the lives under scrutiny were lived in the White House: Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Warren G. Harding, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson. These controversies are most deeply contested when the sexual past in question was in some way transgressive: Jefferson's long relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, Abraham Lincoln's intimate relations with Joshua Speed, and Eleanor Roosevelt's love affair with Lorena Hickock have all been at the center of bitter public controversies.<sup>42</sup>

At their best, these newly complex accounts of the private lives of political figures can offer a new perspective on the formation of a political consciousness or insight into how someone may have operated within a specific social milieu to create change.<sup>43</sup> But political history still has difficulty assimilating these insights, particularly when a researcher cannot produce what may be impossible: proof of a consistent sexual *identity*. The result, as in the case of J. Edgar Hoover or Thomas Jefferson, is fruitless conversations about facts well known to everyone. In this atmosphere historians are as likely to question each other's motivations and ideological predispositions as the methodological approaches that might make those facts useful. Controversies rage with little focus on what a conclusive answer might "prove." Did Nan Britton actually have Warren Harding's child, or did the Harding family merely pay her hush money, as they claim? Did Eleanor Roosevelt have sex with women, or was she prone, as her children and Doris Kearns Goodwin insist, to overheated but platonic female friendships?<sup>44</sup>

As Gayle Rubin has pointed out about these hysterical episodes, in "Western culture, sex is taken all too seriously. . . . Ultimately, of what possible social significance is it if a person likes to masturbate over a shoe?"<sup>45</sup> Rubin's point about anxiety in the face of insignificance points us back to the possibility of using sexual gossip to rethink American political culture.

<sup>42</sup>Annette Gordon Reed, "Engaging Jefferson: Blacks and the Founding Father," and Andrew Burstein, "Jefferson's Rationalizations," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2000): 171–97; for Lincoln and Speed see Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). My understanding of the stakes in such controversies was deepened through a presentation by and subsequent discussion with Mia Bay on the Jefferson-Hemings case at the Southern Intellectual History Circle, the Radcliffe Institute, 23 February 2006.

<sup>43</sup>Estelle Freedman, *Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997); and Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Viking Press, 1992).

<sup>44</sup>John H. Summers, "What Happened to Sex Scandals? Politics and Peccadilloes, Jefferson to Kennedy," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 3 (2000): 825–54; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, the Home Front in World War II* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995).

<sup>45</sup>Rubin, 35.

Some subjects in political history might be better understood by new arguments of this sort than by holding researchers' feet to the fire over the quality of their evidence. Here, the book by Theoharis rebutting Summers's allegations about Hoover is instructive. It not only demonstrates the limitations even on excellent political historians as they grapple with sexual gossip, it also demonstrates the way the absence of evidence is put into play to prove that Hoover was a purely political figure who can only be understood through his public behavior. Theoharis's analysis operates to suppress not only the possibility of a gay Hoover but also the possibility that gossip adds to a useful analysis of Hoover's role as an architect of the cold war state.

Theoharis's work is particularly important because his 1995 book, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime: An Historical Antidote*, is the only work devoted to disproving the sexual rumors about Hoover, and it is routinely cited as authoritative "proof" that the Rosenstiel story is false. Theoharis's authority on these questions is grounded in his reputation as one of the most knowledgeable and dedicated scholars of the FBI and one who has meticulously documented Hoover's violations and manipulation of American law for decades before this controversy erupted.<sup>46</sup> He has also been an activist in the field of political history, changing the terms of the discipline by challenging the government's right to keep secrets from scholars and citizens. He was a plaintiff in the Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, filed in the 1970s, which made available many of the FBI records on which he and subsequent historians, including myself, have relied.

After Susan Rosenstiel's story became public Theoharis became a frequent commentator in both general interest and academic publications. He vigorously refuted her claims in a series of articles that ultimately produced *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime*, which departs from his normal archival methods to address the historiographical problems presented by the controversy. In the book Theoharis forcefully maintained that truth is foundational to history and that Summers was operating in a universe different from that of the professional historian. Without question, Theoharis is correct on this point, but he failed to point out that Summers is an expert on gossip. He has made a career out of the postwar American cultural obsession that "real" political and economic power is exercised in secret, a popular parallel to a central historiographical theme of Theoharis himself. Of course, while both Theoharis and Summers rely on the revelation of often controversial new "facts," Summers's facts are more often than not gleaned from socially marginal people. His bestsellers include *The Files on the Tsars*, published in 1981, a ripping account of the decline and fall of the imperial family of

<sup>46</sup>Athan Theoharis, "The FBI's Stretching of Federal Directives, 1936-1953," *Political Science Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (1976-77): 649-72; "The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940-1966," *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 2 (1985): 271-76; Athan Theoharis, "Dissent and the State: Unleashing the FBI, 1917-1985," *History Teacher* 24, no. 1 (1990): 41-52.

Russia that cited “dramatic new evidence” that the Romanovs survived their execution by the Bolsheviks; *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*, published in 1986, which implicated the Kennedy family in the film star’s death; and *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon*, published in 2000, which asserted that the former president was addicted to Dilantin and that he beat his wife.<sup>47</sup>

Truth in the sense that a historian like Theoharis understands it is not Summers’s goal. Instead, his books strip away the privacy and the respectability that the rich and powerful purchase for themselves and reveal them as the moral frauds they “really” are. In a sense, none of these books is about the subject in the title; rather, they are about the carelessness of the privileged that makes history for the many. Theoharis’s objective is to link facts to historical truth, which makes his task of rebutting the Rosenstiel allegations a difficult one. He does not—and cannot—assert that empirical evidence is the only route to producing the “truth” about Hoover’s sexual identity because he has no evidence that the events Rosenstiel relates did *not* occur. Like an attorney, he cross-examines her to undermine her credibility as a source. He also notes the absence of conventional evidence that might reasonably confirm Hoover’s homosexuality: pictures, arrests for lewd conduct, public or private confessions, or accounts by friends and partners that can be corroborated. Had such evidence existed, Theoharis argues, Hoover’s influence in the law enforcement community was so great that he could have suppressed it or intimidated others into suppressing it. The result is an argument that goes like this: the kind of evidence historians normally use to establish facts does not and *could not* exist, *even if those events had happened*.

For Theoharis, the sexual identity he is working hard to disprove is not the only or even most important issue: what is also at stake is the boundary between “normal” and deviant history, a boundary that is transgressed by sensationalists. “Was Hoover a homosexual?” he asks:

Did his sexuality influence his leadership of the FBI and shape the Bureau’s investigative priorities? For the Hoover biographer, these are important questions, and not the product of a perverted mind. But the private nature of homosexual conduct makes their resolution extremely difficult, particularly in Hoover’s case. Given the moralistic and security-based homophobia of the Cold War era, homosexuals were wise to avoid public discovery of their orientation.

<sup>47</sup>While the Kennedy family seems to ignore most of what is published about them, the allegation that Richard Nixon struck his wife, Pat, has been the object of intense rebuttals from the Nixon family and from the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, a memorial controlled by the family until it was turned over to the National Archives in 2006; see [http://www.nixonfoundation.org/summer\\_response.shtml](http://www.nixonfoundation.org/summer_response.shtml). accessed 27 November 2004.

Had Hoover “been discovered to be homosexual he would have been dismissed or hounded from government,” Theoharis concludes.<sup>48</sup> The argument that a highly placed official might have successfully carried the secret of his homosexuality to his grave raises interesting questions about the conditions under which homosexuals survive government purges and what forms of collaboration allow them to do so.

In addition, noting that Hoover’s only public acknowledgment of homosexuality was a hostile one does not exactly get him, or Theoharis, off the hook. Hoover sent agents out to threaten those who gossiped about him and “Junior,” as the *New York Native*, a gay community newspaper, reported in 1991. This sort of intimidation would suggest that the gossip triggered a higher level of concern than mere lies usually command. Hoover used federal agents to “closely monitor these rumors, alert him to them, and then act forcefully to defend his reputation,” as Theoharis admits. He “made [the rumors] a high FBI priority,” unlike, say, monitoring the activities of the Bonnano crime family. Gay or not, Hoover would have been “obliged . . . to conduct his personal life in a way that precluded the possibility of anyone discovering whether he was a *practicing homosexual*. As a cautious, highly disciplined bureaucrat,” Theoharis concludes, “Hoover would never have put himself in a position where anyone, *other than a homosexual lover*, could uncover such a dangerous secret.”<sup>49</sup> But Theoharis’s conclusion remains purely speculative.

Curiously, Hoover did not do the one thing he might have done to end the rumors: marry. This choice has been made by many powerful homosexual men and women who wished to avoid scrutiny of their private sexual practices. And clearly Hoover did not succeed in stopping the rumors: the “secret” has been disseminated endlessly in gossip, and, in a classically Foucauldian turn, Hoover’s efforts to repress it seem only to have made it more public.

Even Theoharis’s assertion that Hoover was not gay paradoxically evokes a powerful, closeted, and homosexually active politician, destroying evidence at every turn. “Each of the allegations [about homosexuality] turned out to be baseless,” Theoharis notes, “either because records that would have confirmed the allegations had been destroyed or because what was being offered was an eyewitness account. A principal source of the rumors were criminals, and of course, the gay community.” Gay men spread these rumors because of a political agenda, Theoharis adds, “‘outing’ Hoover, whether to expose his hypocritical homophobia or to show that homosexuals could hold

<sup>48</sup>Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime*, 23.

<sup>49</sup>“Our Own KGB: Spreading Rumors about J. Edgar Hoover Would Invite a Visit,” *New York Native*, 16 September 1991; Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime*, 33, 39; and “FBI Wiretapping: A Case Study in Bureau Autonomy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (1992): 117–18.



sensitive government positions without compromising national security.”<sup>50</sup> And yet Theoharis continues to repeat the gossip. He cites Hoover’s

lifelong bachelorhood, his preachy denunciations of sexual indiscretions and his reputation (well founded, as it turns out) for amassing information on the adulterous activities of prominent political leaders. . . . Hoover had a dependent relationship with his mother (whose affection and praise he sought, and with whom he lived until her death in 1938) and a close public relationship with fellow bachelor and FBI Associate Director Clyde Tolson, in whose company he had been regularly seen at lunch, on other social occasions, and on vacation.<sup>51</sup>

Theoharis plays both sides of the fence about what does and does not count as evidence, since the implications of these comments are inescapable.

What Theoharis misses by dismissing evidence researched by gay journalists as only ideological and by not considering advances made in history by participants in sexual identity movements in the United States is that Hoover’s history as a political figure cannot be separated from the history of sexuality. Gay or not, the greatest privilege of Hoover’s life was one he worked to deny to every other citizen of the United States: the right to be free of surveillance and keep one’s own secrets.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Theoharis does not accomplish his objective of rescuing a purely political history of J. Edgar Hoover from the methodological and cultural crudeness he sees in a sexual history of the director; instead, he demonstrates their interdependence. The argument inescapably reproduces Hoover as both the homophobic voyeur of a queer public and the queer object of a national homophobia.

Theoharis misses an important opportunity to reinterpret Hoover’s political significance not because he is particularly homophobic (although he clearly knows little about the relevant sources in gay and lesbian history) but because he is invested in the “normal” questions and conventional evidence that are prioritized by political history as a field. Instead, to demonstrate what this history ought to look like, he adds accounts that are presumably reliable because they are not gay sources. These accounts only confuse the issue further and demonstrate how impossible it is to produce Hoover as a “normal” man. As Theoharis himself notes, Tolson was Hoover’s sole heir. There is also more pajama testimony, this time from Nixon assistant John Erlichman, who claimed to have seen Tolson at Hoover’s house, although apparently convalescing from a long illness. Yet Theoharis disposes even of this information by saying that there is “a predisposition” (among whom?) to “believe the worst” about Hoover because of his “abuses of power as FBI director.” Pointing out that the Hoover revelations came not long

<sup>50</sup>Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime*, 44–45, 53.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 11–14.

<sup>52</sup>Athan Theoharis, “The Truman Administration and the Decline of Civil Liberties: The FBI’s success in Securing Authorization for a Preventive Detention Program,” *Journal of American History* 64, no. 4 (1978): 1010–30, at 1019.

after sexual scandals centering on two politically active and conservative televangelists, he decides that for political audiences obsessed with sexual scandal and hypocrisy the “image of a homosexual Hoover dressed in drag was so outrageous that it was too good a story to disbelieve.”<sup>53</sup>

Just because a story is too good not to be true doesn’t make it false, though. Theoharis dismisses the possibility that gossip might point the historian to anything credible, either a fresh source of evidence or a new interpretation. Instead, the subtitle of the book promises us “an historical antidote” to poisonous gossip. “Why,” he asks rhetorically, “would Susan Rosenstiel have attended a homosexual orgy?” Why would Lewis invite her to “two homosexual parties which could only adversely affect their relationship,” and why did she not leave him after catching him in bed with Roy Cohn? Her explanation—that she was used to her husband having sex with men and that Lewis promised to give her a nice present if she watched him do it—Theoharis finds “incredible,” even though these are the kinds of things some people do. He points out that the Rosenstiels’ divorce records do not mention Lewis’s bisexuality at all and concludes that the story “reflects more about Susan Rosenstiel’s attitudes toward men in general,” introducing yet a new piece of gossip while displacing its subject.<sup>54</sup>

And yet, if we shift perspective and assume that marriages can be sexually unconventional, the story is entirely plausible. My queer reading of this tale would speculate that Susan Rosenstiel liked men—or their money—a great deal. She did not marry two bisexual men by accident; she did so because she preferred them or had negotiated satisfactory financial arrangements in exchange for helping them maintain their respectability. I would speculate that if she was surprised at Roy Cohn’s presence in their marriage bed it was perhaps only his celebrity, or his advanced age, or because she had agreed with Lewis that he would only do such things in hotels that made it memorable. It seems equally plausible that when Lewis invited her to come to the party at the Plaza Hotel it was an extension of more private sex parties in their home that may have included women as well as men and that when he invited her to join the orgy he had reason to believe that she might. If such stories did not show up in the divorce proceedings, it was perhaps because Susan knew that her claims to Lewis’s money and Lewis’s ability to retain his position as a well-paid executive who could pay alimony would be eroded if their sex games became part of the public record.

There is a larger point here not just about gossip but about whose evidence counts. Kessler, for example, finds Roosevelt’s uncorroborated story about a gay Hoover credible but not Rosenstiel’s and considers stories about transvestism “pure malarkey,” using Theoharis as a source.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime*, 11–14.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 39–43.

<sup>55</sup>Ronald Kessler, *The FBI: Inside the World’s Most Powerful Law Enforcement Agency—By the Award-Winning Journalist Whose Investigation Brought down FBI Director William S.*

In other words, only those who already have some social standing can be trusted with the reputations of the political class, even though this standard eliminates virtually all witnesses to a homosexual life lived before 1969. But the scholarly investment in Hoover as omnipotent eliminates the possibility that even a respectable witness might survive. “Whether or not Hoover was a homosexual,” Theoharis concludes, “and I doubt that he was—the wily and cautious FBI director would never have put himself in a position that publicly compromised his sexuality. . . . If he was a practicing homosexual, he would . . . have taken whatever safeguards were needed to ensure that such a dark secret would go with him to his grave.”<sup>56</sup>

Theoharis seems to be implying that if Rosenstiel saw what she claimed to have seen she would not have lived to tell the tale, a truly odd conclusion, since Hoover is not known to have killed or kidnapped his enemies—he only documented their sins. So let us consider a political hypothesis that, because of the emphasis on facts, has not been explored: that to Hoover, Roy Cohn, and Lewis Rosenstiel sex was politics by other means. It was a way to gain or retain influence over and to forge or maintain bonds with others in a way that represented power and not vulnerability. In other words, physical desire and sexual pleasure were entirely inseparable from the search for control, influence, and wealth. In fact, Theoharis understands part of this premise but resists the implications it has for a larger political analysis. Hoover’s style was “moralistic and judgmental,” he writes, but “his purposes were . . . political—whether in promoting a moralistic political climate or soliciting FBI reports on sexual misconduct and then surreptitiously divulging this information.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, Theoharis believes that sex can be a political weapon but denies that political deal making might happen in bed.

How, then, do we write a history that takes what information we have about Hoover’s sexuality into account? Theoharis’s answer to that question would probably be that we can’t, because Hoover’s deepest and most authentic self was political and not sexual. I would like to propose instead that we start with a queer Hoover and queer cold war political history in order to account for him. In this new political history gossip would not be a substitute for fact, but it would not be dismissed as inherently debased or false either. My approach would ask the question, What did Hoover desire? whether sexually or politically, at the same time requiring other historians to ask themselves, What do we desire from Hoover? It is important to restate that this historiographical project should not be aimed at recuperating Hoover as a “gay man” or a “homosexual.” Instead, queering Hoover deploys a more synthetic history of cold war sexuality, not one that belongs to a type of person or to the state

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*Sessions* (New York: Pocket Books, 1993), 369, 461n. Kessler also rebuts the bureau’s view that homosexual agents are undesirable by citing “growing scientific evidence that homosexuality is an inherited genetic trait, like skin color” (347).

<sup>56</sup>Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime*, 55.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

but one that asks and answers questions about how the postwar American polity functioned both in private and in public.

Let me suggest how such a project might proceed. Hoover's death on 2 May 1971 and the end of his regime of bureaucratic secrecy coincided with many episodes of exposure, confession, and conversion that subjected government officials to scrutiny as scandalous as the anti-Communist witch hunts of the McCarthy period—except that this time it was the witch hunters who were scrutinized. Absent the director's iron hand, government secrets began to leak and fictions to unravel. It formed part of a period in which political culture was preoccupied by the exposure of routine and structural government corruption. The Watergate hearings revealed that the covert operations by government agents against private citizens in which Hoover specialized were a characteristic of government more generally. Because of this newfound awareness a president accused of lies, obscenities, and criminal tampering resigned—an unprecedented historical event. Nixon's resignation was closely followed by other revelations, in the 1975 Senate investigations led by Frank Church of Idaho, that the CIA and FBI had been engaged in long-term intelligence gathering operations against its own citizens and domestic political groups, including the martyred Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. These revelations, as Kathryn S. Olmstead has argued, both challenged the "secret government" but ultimately deferred to it, preferring exposure of scandals after the fact over real reform.<sup>58</sup>

Exposure is one important role that truth plays in political history. Re-thinking how we know what we know is another truth-telling project that requires a revision of the field to include histories of sex. As Licia Fiol-Matta has argued, "public fascination with [a political figure's] ambiguous sexuality indicates national homophobia, but also a national investment in [the subject's] sexuality that is stronger than straightforward prejudice suggests." Historians have shown that the modern state has had a fascination with stigmatizing sexual deviance and simultaneously with the creation of protected, elastic spaces where perverts can serve a political project. Not infrequently, these spaces are intensely reactionary.<sup>59</sup> The possibilities for a new political history that takes these vexed figures into account are foreclosed, however, when assumptions about respectability and reliability mean that some evidence is written off as no evidence at all.<sup>60</sup> A useful political history will be one in which queer texts we do not yet understand and the histories of sex we already know are permitted to expand and transform the history of the modern nation-state.

<sup>58</sup>Kathryn S. Olmstead, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>59</sup>Licia Fiol-Matta, *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 49; George Mosse, "Nationalism and Respectability: Normal and Abnormal Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 2 (1982): 221–46; and Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>60</sup>Abelove, xii; Fiol-Matta, 62–63.