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My Life with the FBI

James Carroll

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It's like an agent flashing his credentials at you in the privacy of your bedroom. Those three stark letters loom threateningly, but not from a leather billfold. "FBI Warning! It is a federal crime to . . ." the message says, but it's coming from your own TV set, and this is the beginning of the VCR movie you brought home from your neighborhood video store. You just wanted to watch *Ghostbusters* or *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* or *Casablanca* maybe, but before you can (it's like being frisked at the airport on the way to your vacation) you have to be reminded that they are there somehow in that machine, watching you while you watch it. *And they know*—this is the feeling they want you to have and you have it for an instant despite yourself—*what you are doing!* VCRs are everywhere now and so, by God, after all these years, when we thought they'd forgotten us, is the FBI.

When I was a child, the FBI was everywhere in my world and I loved my world more for that. My first remembered experience of entertainment—one could even say of *story*—was listening on the radio in the late forties to "The FBI in Peace and War," and I can still hum its theme. My older brother Joe and I, and then Brian, too, when he came along, huddled together by the old Philco, riveted because those tales of gangbusters, spy catchers, and G-men evoked the world of our father, who was himself an FBI agent. He was rarely home by the time we went to bed, and so those radio programs filled that primordial need of ours to draw close to him at night before daring to close our eyes against the dark. With such protection, how could we be afraid? With a father engaged in such noble, dangerous, and important pursuits—saving lives and countries—how could our mere loneliness for him deflect the pride we felt? That radio program and another one called "This Is Your FBI," like the succession of television shows (Herbert Philbrick's "I Led Three Lives" and Efrem Zimbalist, Jr.'s "The FBI") and movies (*The House on 92nd Street*, *Walk a Crooked Mile*, *Experiment in Terror*, *Walk East on Beacon*) that would follow them over the next decade portrayed FBI agents as men of such competence and integrity, of such selflessness, that one could only think of them as secular saints, modern-day Knights Templar.

One is tempted now to scoff at such Bureau image making, at the naïveté of children and of a childish culture that had such a need for mythical figures. Joe, Brian, and I *wanted* to think of ourselves as sons of a god, and did. But I stop myself from scoffing. Yes, we've seen through the propaganda, and we can recite the litany of FBI abuses and failures, and we can reject the dichotomizing mind that divides

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people into good and bad, citizens and criminals, patriots and pinkos. J. Edgar Hoover's ghostwriter's most famous book was called *Masters of Deceit*, but the image of the FBI that Americans cherished was itself a masterful deception, as events that culminated in the social chaos of Vietnam and Watergate would reveal. Nevertheless, even now, in recalling the power of that first ideal, in which virtue was not the opposite of masculinity but the essence of it, I recognize that the man I still long to be is the one I first thought my father was.

In 1940, having earned his law degree at night while working days in the Chicago stockyards, my father joined the FBI. He was a crack agent and made a name for himself when he collared Chicago's Roger "Tough" Touhey, one of the last of the notorious Capone-era mobsters. By 1944, the year after I was born, he was in Washington as chief of kidnapping and bank robbery investigations for the entire Bureau. He became one of Hoover's trusted intimates and took on special duties as a Bureau troubleshooter. In that capacity he was loaned to the War Assets Administration, where he was director of security during the massive disposal of weapons and surplus goods after World War II. The division he established then—it was called Compliance Enforcement—became the security operation of the Government Services Administration and survives as one of three present agencies that my father founded.

In 1947 he returned to the FBI as inspector in charge of fraud investigation, but a few months later Hoover tapped him again for a special job. This time it was with the newly founded air force. Stuart Symington was the first secretary of the air force, and he wanted my father to establish a security counterespionage agency like the FBI within the air force itself. In order to implement this plan, my father was immediately commissioned brigadier general. At thirty-seven, he was the youngest general officer in America and certainly the only one in that postwar period who had not earned his rank in combat. The expectation was that, as before, he would establish the new agency and within a few years return to the Bureau, but it didn't work out that way. His temporary status as an air force general became permanent. The agency he founded for the air force was called the Office of Special Investigations, and he was its director for more than a decade. Years later, there would be a popular television show about an OSI agent known as "the Million Dollar Man."

After serving as inspector general of the air force, my father was selected by President Kennedy in 1961 to establish the Defense Intelligence Agency. The DIA was chartered to control all military intelligence activities, from satellites to attachés in embassies to spy ships like the *Pueblo*. It had its first test when my father's people discovered evidence of the Russian missile sites in Cuba. It was my father to whom Secretary McNamara deferred in his televised briefings during the crisis. The CIA had been discredited by the Bay of Pigs fiasco; the fledgling DIA was established by the "triumph" of the Cuban missile crisis. After that, my father rode high. He was reappointed four times, a record unmatched since, and he remained director of the DIA until he retired. But like everyone in the Pentagon in those years, his life of high purpose, patriotic zeal, and self-assured conviction was transformed by the nightmare of Vietnam.

As I came of age, one thing that always struck me about my father was that he never lost his first loyalty to the FBI. Even while he earned the respect of military men who had reason to resent him as an outsider, his best friends were always the agents he'd

served with in the Bureau. The FBI was an extraordinary fraternity of men who depended on each other not only for “backup” in their dangerous work and for friendship in their social lives, but also, and more important, for a mutually sustained worldview. At the center of that worldview, embodying it and bonding its agent-adherents together, was the figure of J. Edgar Hoover. Bureau men were absolutely devoted to him. Certainly my father regarded him as a great man; I remember him saying that Hoover was the greatest man he had ever known. My father could wax eloquent on Hoover’s particular achievement, the creation of an agency known for a rare incorruptibility. If the FBI’s political neutrality was mythical, the integrity of its agents was not, and even Hoover’s critics admired that. As the director of DIA, my father was Hoover’s equal on the U.S. Intelligence Advisory Board for a decade, but he never regarded Hoover as anything like a peer. Rather, he regarded him with reverence and, to my knowledge, never questioned Hoover’s judgment, even at the end of Hoover’s life, when he had become a Szep cartoon of himself. It remains a mystery to me how otherwise intelligent, critical officials could have so completely accepted the Hoover view, to take one example, that American dissenters were conscious agents of communism. Of course, that perception served a purpose, for if antiestablishment impulses all originated in Moscow, then the FBI’s central role in American life—as well as its place near the top of congressional budgets—was guaranteed.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Because of my father’s permanent connection to the Bureau, my brother Joe and I were able to get coveted summer jobs with the FBI when we finished high school. For three summers, beginning in 1960, I worked as a cryptanalyst’s aide in the Cryptanalysis-Translation Section of the FBI Laboratory. The dream Joe and I had shared as we huddled by the Philco years before came true when we were given our badges (plastic building passes, not gold shields) and began to move among the heroes in the world of secrets. I remember the awe I felt as I sat before stacked pages of computer printouts showing endless rows of numbers — encrypted messages to various Washington embassies which originated not only in Cuba and Russia but in England and West Germany. The Bureau systematically monitored diplomatic radio traffic of enemies and allies alike, and though several dozen skilled code breakers — agent eggheads — worked at it steadily, they never succeeded in making sense of those numbers; or if they did, they never told me. Not that the lack of results mattered. It was enough for me to touch those pages and do my primitive clerical analysis—count the fives in each row, say, and note the total in a marginal column my boss would study later. The cryptanalyst-agents, even those math-whiz intellectuals, periodically went on “black-bag jobs,” which were alluded to in whispers. Eventually I learned that the phrase referred to burglaries of embassies for the purpose of discovering cryptographic keys. But burglary was illegal, and it shocked me that agents would break the law, even in the name of—I’d never heard this justification before, but later I’d despair of ever hearing the end of it—national security. It was a sharp lesson when, to my naïf’s assertion that the ends don’t justify the means, an old hand replied, “If the ends don’t, nothing does.” Ironically, it was the exact rationale protesters would use in a few years to justify burglarizing draft boards.

My innate feeling that the FBI was not above the law, any law, was blunted by evident political reality: If Communists were not bound thus in the death struggle of the Cold War, how could our frontline defenders be? It wasn’t the law that would

protect us, but the decisions, judgment, courage, and wisdom of G-men.

But being inside the Bureau in those first three summers of the 1960s brought to light something else that undercut my ability to transfer my trust from the Constitution to the men sworn to uphold it. I saw up close the overbearing system of Bureau discipline which inhibited the men who submitted to it. Inside the FBI, Hoover was a petty tyrant who regulated the minutiae of every employee's life. I remember thinking, No wonder Dad stayed in the air force. During one of my summer stints for the Bureau, a clerk wore a red vest with shiny brass buttons to work one day. He was unlucky enough to be in the elevator when the Director stepped on. Hoover broke his usual silence with underlings to ask what office the man worked in. When the waistcoated clerk returned to his desk, his supervisor was waiting there to fire him for his inappropriate attire.

Agents were as intimidated as clerks. I was shocked, for example, at the routine dishonesty with which they falsified their sign-in entries on reporting to work. I didn't appreciate then that they were unreasonably required to compile impossible quotas of "voluntary overtime." I was embarrassed for agents when I saw them sneak off for coffee as their supervisor stepped out of his guard-post-like glass cubicle for a moment. I watched agents grow pale as they exchanged stories of the Director's most recent punitive transfer of some unlucky offender. Those men who would willingly risk their lives to break into the embassies of our enemies feared Hoover the way adolescents like me feared our fathers. I understood that their worst nightmare—being caught in the code room, say, of the Soviet Mission up Sixteenth Street from the White House—represented at bottom the dread not of death or ignominious imprisonment for an officially denied crime, but of embarrassing the Bureau and drawing down the wrath of J. Edgar Hoover.

Yet their loyalty to him was absolute. By my third summer, Hoover's conflict with the U.S. attorney general was bitter. For the first time since his appointment in 1924, the Director was dealing with a superior who thought he was just that. The agents I knew seemed to take their cue from Hoover, and they quickly professed to hate the man who humiliated the Director by, for example, "feminizing" the austere courtyard that separated the FBI wing of the Justice Department Building from the AG's wing with cheery umbrella-tables and an employee snack bar. Hoover ordered the tables removed and instantly they were. Bureau people gasped the next day when the tables reappeared; this was a combat of the gods. And something went out of our universe when the tables remained.

The attorney general was Robert Kennedy, and it wasn't only on trivial issues like umbrellas in the courtyard that he challenged Hoover. I remember the thrill it was to be excused from work one morning (it was like getting out of school) to go over into the "Justice" side of the building, into the imposing auditorium where the attorney general was to speak to the Department's summer interns. Those of us who were from the Bureau—not *interns* but *employees*—felt like an elite because we knew that FBI men were on the front line of the two great battles—against Communists and mobsters—which had made Bobby Kennedy famous, first with McCarthy, then with Kefauver. Imagine my surprise when Kennedy, looking so young, sounding so impassioned—the very opposite of our Hoover—gave a rousing speech that beseeched us to dedicate ourselves to the most important cause in America: not the routing of Gus Hall or Jimmy Hoffa, but the struggle for civil rights, the civil rights of "colored people"! It was a powerful, moving statement of his intention to put

Justice on the side of justice, and I was profoundly affected by it. After all those years of thinking I knew who the bad guys were, I returned to the Bureau side of the building wondering. Even I understood at once that when Kennedy attacked, implicitly, the institutions which prevented black Americans from gaining access to full equality, one of them was my own beloved and all-white FBI. My movement away from the world and worldview to which I was born and toward an eventual alliance first with civil rights activists, then with radicals, draft resisters, fugitives, and outlaws, began in the formal auditorium of the very agency that, by decade's end, would be leading the charge against them.

At the end of that summer, Bobby Kennedy made good on his commitment and sent federal marshals to Mississippi to escort James Meredith into Ole Miss. And I sensed, rightly I think, that he could not have sent FBI agents, the more appropriate escorts, because he couldn't trust Hoover on the issue. To Hoover, blacks like Meredith and King who demanded justice were causes of the trouble, not victims of it. Even I knew that Hoover was wrong. When I finished my time at the Bureau that summer to begin training for the Roman Catholic priesthood—to be an agent, but without a gun—I received a letter from Hoover wishing me well. Though I knew such letters were mere formalities, that their signatures were forged (by secretaries or by machines, we never knew which), and though I'd rejected the Director's despotic methods and begun to abhor his racial and cultural biases, I was thrilled to receive his letter. And it's like confession to say that I still have it.

By the end of that typhoon of decades, I was a Catholic priest actively involved in the antiwar movement and my brother Brian was an FBI agent charged with tracking down resisters. The young men whom I helped to avoid the draft and even to flee to Canada he was sworn to pursue and capture. By the early seventies, with the war still not ended, even timid draft counselors like me had begun committing acts of civil disobedience and going to jail for it. You don't have to be a psychiatrist to appreciate what it meant for me to be arrested by OSI men at an air force base (my father was by then a three-star general in charge of all military intelligence for Vietnam) or in the main rotunda of the U.S. Capitol where, it's no exaggeration to say, I'd *worshipped* as a boy.

How far I had come from my youthful ideal, in which Catholic priests and FBI agents occupied similar positions of mythical power, became all too obvious when a pair of agents made one of their famous visits to my office at Boston University, where I was the Catholic chaplain. I wanted to tell them all that we had in common, but I said nothing. They were two of the dozens of agents searching for members of the Catholic peace movement who had raided draft boards to protest the war in Vietnam. I had no direct involvement in the draft board raids or the underground network that hid the fugitives, but it flattered me that the FBI would think I might have. Finally, exasperated by my refusal to answer their questions, one of the agents, a Jesuit-trained Irish Catholic who had no category for Catholic resisters, especially priests and nuns, blurted the question, "What kinds of creatures are they who would turn against their country like this?"

"We're human beings," I answered.

My greatest fear in those years was that I would find myself in direct conflict with my brother Brian. Initially I thought it wouldn't happen because while I was in Boston, he was assigned to the FBI Field Office in Philadelphia. But then, on March

8, 1971, something completely unexpected occurred. Members of the Catholic left, retaliating for the FBI harassment that had led to the infamous trial in Harrisburg of "Philip Berrigan and seven others," as the press always dubbed it, burglarized the FBI Resident Agency in Media, Pennsylvania. They called themselves the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, and they set about at once to publish the various stolen documents. It was the first time FBI files had ever been made available without authorization. The image of a rogue agency manipulating, infiltrating, and interfering not only with militant groups but with mainstream, even innocuous organizations like the phone company and the Boy Scouts was given substance by memos and reports which described such tactics in detail. For the first time in its history, the FBI was made to seem to the public at large simultaneously sinister and ridiculous.

And J. Edgar Hoover was not pleased. He suspended the head of the Media office without pay and launched a national manhunt with his best agents to find those responsible for what in Bureau argot was immediately dubbed MEDBURG. A few Catholic pacifists had done what no gangster and no KGB operative had ever done before, and, by God, the Director wanted them!

Despite enjoying the spectacle from the sidelines—after all those years, the red-vested clerk was being avenged—I felt a certain pity for the Bureau and a kind of grief for my own innocence. When I visited my brother Brian that spring, I was relieved that we were able to lay aside the political and ideological tensions that might have made our encounter impossibly awkward. We laughed at the irony—and the accident—of our being on opposite sides, and we were both grateful that the peace wars hadn't ruined our friendship. I was relaxed about Media because I'd had nothing to do with it, though I'd heard rumors that various acquaintances of mine were involved. No one in the Bureau was relaxed about it though, not even Brian.

When the Bureau found it couldn't prove that the Catholics had pulled off the Media raid, it did the next best thing. Using the services of an agent-provocateur named Robert Hardy, the FBI set up some of the Media suspects, as well as numerous others, in a new burglary, a draft-board raid at the Federal Building in Camden, New Jersey, across the river from Philadelphia. That action took place one night in August 1971, and several good friends of mine from Boston were involved in it. Because Hardy had the Bureau tipped off from the start, dozens of agents, including Brian, had no trouble breaking in on the raid, shoving the snouts of their shotguns under the chins of unarmed Catholic flower children, and arresting what turned out to be the "Camden 28." Brian told me later that he and his colleagues had waited to spring their trap in the embalming room of a mortuary across the street. But that was far from the worst insult to the Bureau's dignity, for when the case against the twenty-eight came to trial—I was there as a character witness for several defendants—the judge threw it out and lectured the FBI on the abuses of entrapment. Hoover was dead by then, and so was our easy belief in America.

Things are different now, of course. After a period in which the most outrageous suspicions of wild-eyed radicals seemed to prove true—one FBI Director was disgraced by Watergate and another was investigated by his own agents for misusing government property—the Bureau seems back on an even keel. But if the FBI isn't the sinister monolith of Hoover's critics, neither is it the bastion of American invincibility some of us once revered. Hispanics, blacks, and women have been recruited as agents, but the new equality became complete in 1985 when the first

woman agent was killed. In a tragedy that could never have been written into the script of the radio show in the forties, she was shot accidentally by her fellow agents as they were trying to stop a bank robbery.

The current Director, William H. Webster, has so successfully restored the prestige of his own office that he is widely considered a candidate for appointment to the Supreme Court, but the agency as a whole has never really recovered its earlier luster. The rigid hold Hoover had over his agents has been eased, but in recent years the inconceivable became a reality when agents were brought to trial for graft and even for espionage.

The range of FBI concerns has been extended from the relatively easy and statistically satisfying pursuit of car thieves and Communists to the problems of white collar crime and drug enforcement. But juries in the Abscam and DeLorean cases wondered if the fine line between pursuit and entrapment wasn't still getting crossed. The aggressive dogging of organized crime figures like the Angiulos in Boston and the Gambinos in New York makes it seem that the old gang-busting FBI is back, but there's reason to think that even the FBI's much-publicized war on drug trafficking (conducted with the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Secret Service, and U.S. Customs) has backfired. Now the risk of being caught is so much greater than it used to be that drug importers have begun trading in the smallest, most easily concealed, and most profitable substance available. Thus, thanks in part to the FBI, the drug of choice in America is no longer marijuana but the far more deadly cocaine. Everything, in other words, seems more complicated now, and the Bureau's solutions, like the black-bag jobs of earlier days, still have a way of becoming problems.

My brother Brian, meanwhile, has by now become a seasoned agent and a respected member of the faculty at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. Among other things, he helps prepare agents to get terrorists off our airplanes without killing us. And who isn't grateful for that? I have learned to appreciate his dedication, his savvy intelligence, and his courage, and he, more than any mellowing of my left-leaning criticism, is what enables me to think well of the FBI today. And a second look at the Bureau is instructive. One has only to compare it to other police agencies or to the like organizations of other nations to feel grateful for the FBI. One has only to meet today's young agents—through Brian, I've met many of them—to realize that Bureau standards remain impressively high.

But even agents from my time can impress. My brother helped me reestablish a friendship with one of them. He was a clerk with me in the Cryptanalysis Section twenty-five years ago. Now he is on the Organized Crime Squad in Boston—a worldly-wise agent who has seen it all. He embraced the old Bureau when I first did, but is enough a part of the new to be proud that his wife of many years has become an agent now too. Though the decades took us far apart and could easily have made us antagonists, they did not undermine the rare affection that we shared as young men.

There was one sudden moment in the mid-seventies when my pride in my father's early career and in my brother's matching it and when my fondness for FBI friends and nostalgia for my own initiation into Bureau secrets all came back, in a kind of ambush of feeling. It happened when I was briefly a volunteer bus monitor in Boston during the 1975 school busing crisis. My job was simply to be an adult presence, supportive of the bused children and prepared to report abuses to the court. On the first morning of school, when I boarded a bus that was half full of black boys and

girls about to run the gauntlet into all-white South Boston—the resisters now were racists—one of the boys said, “You’re an FBI man, right?” I sensed his awe and recognized it as what I’d felt when I was his age. I asked him why he thought so. He eyed my plastic credential pinned to my lapel—like my building pass from years before—and replied, “Because the FBI are the only white folks on our side.” And I thought of the day in the Justice Department auditorium when Bobby Kennedy changed my mind about America.

I am a novelist now, not a priest, and my view tends to be less dichotomized than it was, less prone to divide the world into saints and sinners. It’s a function perhaps only of middle age, only, that is, of having now and then seen the saints and sinners switch places and having found oneself at home as much on one side as on the other. Still, as a writer, the ever-absolute FBI is a vein I mine repeatedly. Agents feature somehow in all five of the novels I’ve published, sometimes as villains and sometimes as heroes, but mostly, I hope—as I said to the agents who quizzed me at B.U.—as human beings. Among the looming figures from our culture, only priests feature more than agents in the stories I write, and they tend to be my heroes and villains, too. Priests and agents, even if we’ve left behind the old piety and a naive notion of American innocence, remain figures of connotation for us because—however tough these years have made us, however wise, however disenchanted—the ideas and ideals priests and agents first embodied and which they imperfectly represent today remain the ideas and ideals we yearn to lay claim on once again.