

Enemies – A History of the FBI

by Tim Weiner

My impression of, and feelings about, the FBI have been heavily influenced by what I've seen in movies and on television over the years. Who could not admire the conscientious, well-motivated and selfless agent Clarice Starling, portrayed by Jodie Foster, in *Silence of the Lambs*, or enjoy the wacky Sandra Bullock character in *Miss Congeniality*? Alternatively, who could tolerate the constant interference to efficient police operations for those hard bitten heroes in *Law and Order* by officious and sometimes corrupt FBI officers? Various movies about gangsters from the all too real Capone through to the fictional Corleone and beyond have also been pursued relentlessly by the FBI to the great credit of that organisation. More recently, there was Leonardo DiCaprio's powerful portrayal of FBI boss J Edgar Hoover in the eponymous film made by Clint Eastwood but there is more to the FBI than Hoover even though he is clearly transcendent in its history, having dominated for 60 of its 100 years. Weiner delivers the lot.

As a foreigner, I struggled with the details of the modern American history depicted in *J Edgar* and wanted to understand it better. Tim Weiner has facilitated that in this book published last year. Weiner is a Pulitzer prize winning *New York Times* correspondent on national security issues, whose abilities in intelligence research and unique sources are the stuff of legend. He wrote a book called *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* in 2008, which I enjoyed in the main and which destroyed my pre-existing notions of that organisation also gleaned from film and television. The CIA came out looking somewhat pathetic: understaffed, under-resourced, and underachieving and, perhaps correctly, under-appreciated.

What of the 'fibbies'? Weiner made a request 27 years ago under the Freedom of Information Act to get Hoover's secret intelligence files declassified and they finally were. He also received many more recent files and transcripts of interviews, all of which he used to fashion a detailed and seemingly revelatory history of domestic security in the land of the free. Hoover emerges not so much as evil genius as modern Machiavelli although the gap between those two descriptors is not large at times. He hated communists with a passion but he resisted the attempts of the equally Machiavellian President Richard Nixon to spy on the Democrats. As a result, Nixon resorted to a ragtag group of ex-FBI and ex-CIA types as the 'plumbers' that broke into the *Watergate* building in Washington in 1972. Hoover was fortunate to have died before that fiasco played out. His successor at the FBI, L Patrick Gray, was a Nixon acolyte who made Hoover look noble and upstanding. This is living history for me and I found it fascinating.

I also learned the FBI is a much bigger fish than the CIA and, contrary to popular opinion, it does conduct operations overseas. The leadership has evolved to be more respectful of the principles of the founding fathers, which is very encouraging.

As may be expected from someone that writes well enough to be published in the *New York Times*, Weiner's prose is excellent, objective and fact based but gripping at the same time. A great read.

Five stars