

“Don’t shoot G-Men!”: The rise and fall of the FBI’s G-Man Image

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It seems hard to imagine in the present, but from the 1930s until the 1960s the FBI agent, or “G-Man”, was a cultural hero. The G-Man appeared in movies, television shows, and comic books, exciting young children and building a beloved image of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and its Director, J. Edgar Hoover. However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s this image had begun to crack. In 1965, 84% of Americans gave the FBI a “highly favorable” rating.¹ Yet, by 1970, this rating had dropped to 71%, and by 1973 it was down to 52%.² This change was well before the events of Watergate and the revelations surrounding COINTELPRO; so, what triggered it?

Building on the work of scholars like Richard Gid Powers, I will argue that the FBI’s popularity was in part tied to the G-Man stereotype which, by the late 60s, fell out of fashion and in part caused the FBI’s popularity to diminish. I will begin by reviewing the traditional image of the G-Man as established in the 1935 film *G-Men* starring James Cagney. This film introduced Americans to the characteristics of the G-Man: tough, manly, and redeemable through action. Following this film, the G-Man character appeared in popular entertainment throughout the 1930s until the 1950s. However, I will then argue that in the late 1950s the Bureau changed the G-Man characteristics. The 1950s G-Man’s values changed from action oriented to family-focused and traditional. While this was suitable for the 1950s, it was unsuitable for the changing world of the 60s. This essay will argue that the change of the G-Man character contributed to the FBI’s loss of mainstream appeal.

This paper will focus on examining the evolution of the G-Man character exclusively through film and television. These means of communication were important to the FBI for two reasons. First, they could control the narrative most efficiently in film and television. As Matthew Cecil details, public relations for the FBI before film and television had meant dealing with the press.³ In this period, controlling the kind of stories that were picked up was hard given that

¹ Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 264.

² *Ibid.*

³ Matthew Cecil, *Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau's Image* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 268.

reporters had their own agendas, which often conflicted with the FBI's.⁴ Thankfully for the Bureau, film and television, two mediums which were easily controlled and manipulated, became increasingly popular. Unlike news stories, the FBI could monitor television shows and films throughout their entire inception. In productions like *The FBI* (1965-1974) they did just this: "the Bureau assigned an agent to the set, revised and rewrote scripts, and screened every member of the cast and crew for 'subversive' ties."⁵ As Hoover said, television and film were beneficial because the FBI could tell the story exactly how it wanted.⁶ The second reason the FBI focused a lot of attention on film and television was because these mediums were not just accessible but very popular. In the early days of film, more Americans went to the cinema than to church.⁷ Though the number of filmgoers dropped in the 1960s, American obsession with television rose. Between 1949 and 1969, the number of Americans with at least one TV went from one million to forty-four million.⁸ The FBI, therefore, had the potential to influence millions of Americans through television and film and thus got involved as early as possible.

The original incarnation of the G-Man (or FBI Agent) first appeared on screen in the 1935 film, *G-Men* (1935), starring James Cagney.⁹ The original G-Man is akin to the pulp detective of the 1920s, meaning he exudes a rough and ready manliness. In *G-Men*, for example, James Cagney is shown to be a good agent because of his experience growing up in a tough neighborhood.¹⁰ He knows how to fire a gun and how to fight, and he is contrasted against the other, newer agents who are lawyers and assumed to be weak.¹¹ The original G-Man character, however, was not entirely a retread of the pulp detective formula. Unlike the pulp detective, the G-Man is a smart dresser, a quieter presence, and one whose attention is turned to Washington and not women.¹²

The original G-Man character followed three important cliches which were both helpful to the FBI and solidified his popularity. First, like the pulp detective, the original G-Man is redeemable through action. This means that the G-Man need not be a moral exemplar: so long as

⁴ Cecil, *Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate*, 268.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John Sbardellati, *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 1.

⁸ Bill Ganzel, "Television," *Farming in the 1950s & 60s: Wessels Living History Farm*, https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe50s/life_17.html.

⁹ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 94.

¹⁰ *G-Men*, directed by William Keighley, 1935 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 14 August 2013), Youtube.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 246.

he gets the criminals, he is effective.¹³ Cagney, for example, frequently disobeys his superiors, but is forgiven because of how successful of an agent he is.¹⁴ This cliché is an important aspect of Hoover and the FBI's public relations strategy as it moves the conversation from one about the FBI's adherence to rules to one about the Bureau's effectiveness.¹⁵ The second important cliché of the original G-Man formula was that he was "forging a new path."¹⁶ The G-Man was presented as a new kind of law enforcement agent, one who was on the cutting edge of technology and crime-fighting. This gave him a special significance above the local police and pulp detective, who were often portrayed as inefficient and incompetent. The original G-Man was not the status quo, and that is what made him so effective and interesting. The final important cliché is that the gangsters the original G-Man pursues are always self-interested and never political. In *G-Men*, for example, Legget and his gang are only interested in robbing banks so they can become richer and indulge in a more extravagant lifestyle.¹⁷ Criminals like this, who follow no real-world ideology, are politically neutral. They make no attempt to justify their actions and, therefore, Cagney can take them down without having to take a political stance and possibly alienate any viewers. The original G-Man rose above the pulp detective because he presented his quest to capture or kill his real-world politically neutral enemies.

Some critics argue that Hoover and the FBI's role in the production of *G-Men* is ambiguous and that it is, therefore, unfair to use this film as the source of the original G-Man character. For example, the critic E.G. Carlston argues that it was the movie studios, and not Hoover, who shaped the original G-Man.¹⁸ Other scholars such as Richard Powers argue that Hoover was very involved in the production, and this original G-Man was based on his philosophy.¹⁹ Regardless of the FBI's precise role in this particular production, it is certain that following the popularity of the movie *G-Men*, the G-Man character was endorsed and perpetuated by the Bureau. The G-Man stereotype saw a massive initial public success with the film *G-Men* earning \$1,143,000 in the domestic box office.²⁰ This initial success meant that the G-Man stereotype was reproduced in films, television

¹³ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 246.

¹⁴ *G-Men*.

¹⁵ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 247.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *G-Men*.

¹⁸ E.G. Carlston, "Domesticated Masculinity and the Pink-Washing of the FBI," *Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no. 8 (28 July 2017): 514-39.

¹⁹ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 247.

²⁰ "G-Men," *IMDB*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0026393/>.

shows, and comic books throughout the 1930s and 40s.²¹ This mass production happened if not always with the FBI's explicit approval, then with their implicit.²² The decision to allow the stereotype to achieve prominence was not simply a coincidence, given how carefully Hoover and the FBI monitored their public image.²³ No matter who invented this first G-Man, he was popular and effective. Thus, the FBI had no desire to challenge this character in the 1930s and 40s, and the original G-Man was born. However, by the late 1950s, the Bureau did have a desire to reinvent the G-Man character. This is clear given that both the film, *The FBI Story* and the television show *The FBI* - two productions that the Bureau controlled - present a G-Man who is very different from Cagney's original. For the new G-Man domesticity, not crimefighting, was his defining characteristic.

The film *The FBI Story* introduced the world to the "new G-Man". Unlike *G-Men*, this production was undoubtedly influenced by the FBI's morals and guiding philosophy. The FBI approved every frame of the film and even had two special agents on set throughout the production.²⁴ Any changes the film made to the G-Man character were done intentionally by the FBI. The film follows the life of Chip Hardesty, played by Jimmy Stewart.²⁵ Chip is a family man whose life is equally divided between his domestic duties and his crime-fighting.²⁶ As many scholars and reviewers have noted, the film makes a point to connect every major FBI event to a different Hardesty family crisis.²⁷ For example, following the successful arrest of a murderous banker, Chip returns home to learn that his wife, Lucy, has had a miscarriage.²⁸ He vows to quit the Bureau but Lucy, played by Vera Miles, will not let him.²⁹ The FBI, she argues, is worth family sacrifices and ultimately contributes to the family's success.³⁰ By connecting the domestic world with the outer crime-fighting world, the film attempts to prove that the FBI is not an impediment to the family's success but instead is an element of it.³¹ This philosophy follows a popular 1950s

²¹ Vanessa Romo, "The FBI In Pop Culture," *Morning Edition*, NPR, July 12, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/12/536782057/the-fbi-in-pop-culture>.

²² Cecil, *Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate*, 268.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *The FBI Story*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, 1959 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 17 January 2014), Youtube Rentals.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Carlston, "Domesticated Masculinity," 526-528.

²⁸ *The FBI Story*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 241.

³¹ *Ibid.*

American trend; to view a traditional home as a sign of success, stability and security both for yourself and the nation. As Elaine Tyler May explains in *Homeward Bound*, popular thinking of the 1950s argued that “traditional values, would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation.”³² Traditionalism offered a point of stability in the otherwise uncertain atomic age.³³ Politicians and the government, seeing Americans flock to the suburbs, embraced this philosophy. As May says: “Nixon argued that American superiority in the Cold War rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of modern suburban homes.”³⁴ The home of the 1950s was place of both family security and political importance. The new G-Man hoped to protect this new American philosophy through his emphasis on domesticity.

The three clichés of the G-Man formula, which had previously ensured his critical protection and popularity, also changed in the 1950s. The first new cliché was that the revised G-Man was no longer an apolitical force, as Cagney and his criminals were. Rather, the new G-Man believed in traditional values and was willing to stick up for them. For example, in *The FBI Story*, Cagney defends traditional values in many little ways, whether encouraging his daughters to be good wives, encouraging his son to fight in World War 2, or expressing his disgust at the Communist's lack of religiosity.³⁵ Cagney constantly preaches the values of family, church and state. The second cliché of the new G-Man was that he defends the status quo and fights crimes only to restore normalcy. As Richard Powers says, “every week on *The FBI*, the agent's smooth office routine of paper shuffling and chitchat about wives and kids was interrupted by a crisis in the form of a crime, [...] then the team pulled together to get things back to normal.”³⁶ The new G-Man was no longer a hero forging a new crime-fighting path, but instead a guardian of the status quo. This shift represented a fundamental change in how the G-Man was positioned in culture. The last cliché of the new G-Man was that his popularity was based not on his crime fighting, but on his virtue. He was no longer redeemable through action alone. These new clichés of the 1950s ultimately lead to the new G-Man becoming increasingly unpopular in the late 1960s. In the following paragraphs, I will examine the new G-Man's three clichés' considering the negative reactions they provoked during the 1960s.

³² Elaine Tyler May, and American Council of Learned Societies, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁵ *The FBI Story*.

³⁶ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 247.

First, the new G-Man's politics were out of line with 1960s mainstream America. For example, the new G-Man viewed civil rights protest as overly disruptive, even though they were increasingly popular. In his 1965 article for the *New York Times*, "The Junior G-Man Grows Senior," Tom Wicker's argued that Hoover - the top G-Man and representative of the G-Man philosophy - had lost touch with mainstream America.³⁷ Hoover had recently called Martin Luther King Junior "the most notorious liar in history," which Wicker says "[o]nly Dr. King's worst enemies regarded [...] as anything but an overstatement."³⁸ In Wicker's view, Hoover's sentiment was not widely shared, and the FBI endorsed an increasingly unpopular opinion. This was not just Wicker's feeling - Pew Research polls suggest that, in 1965, 48% of Americans supported the march on Selma and Dr. King.³⁹ As Richard Gid Powers details, "Hoover's public stand against King for the first time pitted the FBI director [and the G-Man] not just against outcasts from the American consensus, but millions of Americans who regarded the civil rights movement as a moral crusade, and Martin Luther King as the keeper of the American conscience."⁴⁰ The new G-Man, however, was within his character to oppose civil rights as overly disruptive. Both Chip Hardesty, from *the FBI Story*, and Inspector Lewis Erskine, from *The FBI*, craved family security and stability above *all* else. Yet, Americans were increasingly seeing some instability as necessary to change. Therefore, the new G-man's political attitude was falling out of touch with mainstream America.

Secondly, the new G-Man's passivity in the name of the status quo was unpopular. In the 1960s, popular culture became more transformative for both liberals and conservatives, all while the FBI remained committed to its traditionalist image. On the political left, there was the counterculture movement, civil rights, black power, and women's liberation movements (to name a few).⁴¹ On the right, there were turns to conservatism, evangelicalism, and individualism.⁴² These divided sides both saw political action as necessary to achieve their goals and respond to the

³⁷ Cecil, *Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate*, 13.; Tom Wicker, "Washington: The Junior G-Man Grows Senior," *New York Times*, 15 July 1965, E10.

³⁸ Wicker, "Washington," 10.

³⁹ Andrew Kohut, "From the archives: 50 years ago: Mixed views about civil rights but support for Selma demonstrators," *Pew Research*, 16 January 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/16/50-years-ago-mixed-views-about-civil-rights-but-support-for-selma-demonstrators/>.

⁴⁰ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 265.

⁴¹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 21.

⁴² *Ibid.*

other.⁴³ This was a fundamental change from the “domestic tranquility” that had been emphasized in the 1950s.⁴⁴ The 1950s G-Man valued inaction and stability above all else, which was incompatible with the 1960s desire for change. Again, the G-Man was out of touch with mainstream Americans. An example of this cultural clash can be seen in F.B.I director J. Edgar Hoover’s article for the *Parent Teacher Association Magazine*, titled “A Study in Student Extremism”. In this article, Hoover, taking on the new G-Man's values, argued not just against “student radicals,” but against any student involved in politics on campus – liberal or conservative. As he argued:

The vast majority couldn’t care less for slogans [...] in reality it is the immediate, at-hand issues inside schools that, as one lady told me, ‘really turn kids on’ - issues such as dress regulation [...] cafeteria service and/or food, [and] disciplinary rules.⁴⁵

Given that students of many different political persuasions had begun to mobilize, it should not come as a surprise that this article managed to alienate everyone. The *PTA Magazine* received hundreds of angry letters from parents who complained about Hoover’s labeling of all student activity as inappropriate. Although they attacked Hoover by name, critics at the time are also referring to the new G-Man's philosophy more generally. This is because, as Matthew Cecil argues, Hoover never acted inconsistently with the FBI's current PR image, which is part of the reason he was frequently referred to as the “top G-Man.”⁴⁶ Therefore, the new G-Man cliché to protect the status quo had begun to fall out of style with American popular culture.

Finally, the new G-Man’s value preaching was seen as hypocritical. As Powers describes: “the domesticated G-Man based his claim to popular respect on his righteousness, and so, according to the unforgiving logic of popular culture, with the first stain on his cloak of moral perfection he forfeited [this] claim.”⁴⁷ It did not take long for him to “stain his cloak,” as popular culture began to see the hypocrisy in a hero who preached family values while spying on and threatening American citizens. The American public had long had some knowledge of the FBI’s illegal activities. As early as the 1920s there was knowledge that the Bureau regularly abused Americans civil liberties by monitoring private citizens and targeting political dissidents for

⁴³ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ John Edgar Hoover, “The SDS and the High Schools: A Study in Extremism,” *The PTA Magazine* 64 (Jan. 1970): 2-5.; John Edgar Hoover, “The SDS and the High Schools: A Study in Extremism,” *The PTA Magazine* 64 (Feb. 1970): 8-9.

⁴⁶ Cecil, *Hoover’s FBI and the Fourth Estate*, 13.

⁴⁷ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover’s FBI*, 254.

harassment.⁴⁸ Yet, as Powers says, this did not affect the FBI's image in part because of the popularity of the original G-Man:

There was an enormous amount of discreditable information about the Bureau that the public knew about the FBI before Hoover's death, but that it chose to ignore. During the very years of the Bureau's greatest public relations triumphs, in fact, there had appeared a sizable volume of published material hostile to the FBI. [...] [Yet,] everything was ignored or suppressed to preserve popular culture's stereotype of the heroic G-Man.⁴⁹

The original G-Man could brush off charges of wrongdoing because cliché meant that so long as he got the criminal, he was effective. As Powers says: "The old G-Man never claimed to be a saint; if he were caught taking a shortcut around the Bill of Rights, he could always redeem himself by catching another cook or smashing another spy ring."⁵⁰ Of course, the FBI itself was not immune to criticism. Its original G-Man character helped the bureau maintain good will. On the other hand, the new G-Man could be criticized for the stereotype was no longer founded on his crimefighting, but on his morals - which he frequently contradicted. Again, as Powers says: "[b]y turning the G-Man into a symbol of morality Hoover made the bureau vulnerable to precisely the kind of allegations that began to surface during the 1960s."⁵¹ The G-Man character, therefore, became increasingly parodied for his hypocrisy.

Take for example the portrayal of the G-Man in the *The President's Analyst* (1967), a counterculture film the Bureau hated.⁵² In this film, an analyst is assigned to the President of the United States to help him deal with the stresses of his job.⁵³ However, the analyst himself gets too stressed out and abandons work.⁵⁴ For the rest of the film, he is pursued by the FBR and CEA – the films versions of the FBI and CIA – who fear he will leak the President's secrets.⁵⁵ In the film, the G-Men are continuously mocked for not seeing the irony in their preaching wholesome family values while spying on and threatening American citizens. A particularly memorable exchange involves a young child who reports the protagonist's whereabouts to two G-Men.⁵⁶ While the child

⁴⁸ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 267.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁵² Nathaniel Thompson, "The President's Analyst," *Turner Classic Movies*, retrieved 6 March 2019.

⁵³ *The President's Analyst*, directed by Theodore J. Flicker (Hollywood CA: Paramount Pictures, 1967), Criterion Chanel.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

explains his story, he is twice reprimanded by the G-Men for being “bigoted” and “swearing.”⁵⁷ Yet, following the story, when asked by the child if they are going to kill the protagonist, the G-Men answer: “Yes we are going to shoot him dead.”⁵⁸ The scene clearly demonstrates the absurdity of the new G-Man who preaches moral purity while killing people for a living.

By the time of Hoover’s death in 1972, the FBI’s image was on shaky ground with the American public.⁵⁹ The FBI was seen as an increasingly political force attached to a set of values the country was quickly leaving behind. What finally killed the FBI’s public image is uncertain. Critics like Matthew Cecil focus on the idea that it was the FBI’s terrible PR that killed them.⁶⁰ Others like Richard Powers focus on the idea that Watergate was an inescapable mess that simply took the FBI down with it.⁶¹ It is uncertain whether the original G-Man could have weathered any of these. It is, however, certain that the new G-Man could not. His design and values were the antithesis of the new culture and even among conservatives the saintly preaching came off poorly.

In conclusion, the domestication of the G-Man was inappropriate for the changing world of the 1960s and ultimately contributed to the FBI’s loss of mainstream appeal. The hypocrisy and unchanging nature of the new G-Man’s values made him increasingly distant from mainstream American culture. These values were intimately tied to 1950s culture as seen in novels like *Homeward Bound*. The new G-Man made his first appearance in the film *The FBI Story* and the television show, *The FBI*. He had changed significantly from the G-Man James Cagney portrays in the film *G-Men*. The FBI of today is widely distrusted by the American public, and while it is uncertain the extent to which any particular G-Man could have survived the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, it is certain that the G-Man of the 1950s could not.⁶²

⁵⁷ *The President's Analyst*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 264.

⁶⁰ Cecil, *Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate*, 85.

⁶¹ Powers, *G-Men, Hoover's FBI*, 289.

⁶² “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019,” *Pew Research Centre*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>.

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