
Book Review

Parody of J. Edgar in the White House

by Edward Spannaus

Unlimited Access: An FBI Agent Inside the Clinton White House

by Gary Aldrich

Regnery Publishing, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1996
222 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

It would be a close contest as to whether the prize for the literary hoax of the year should go to *Newsweek* columnist Joe Klein for *Primary Colors*, or to Gary Aldrich for *Unlimited Access*. At least Klein's book forthrightly portrays itself as a work of fiction, while Aldrich's parades as a first-hand documentary account of life in the Clinton White House.

After a flurry of lurid headlines, even some of Bill Clinton's worst detractors began to realize that the hype around Aldrich's book was backfiring, and more than one commentator suggested that it might work to Clinton's benefit, because it was so easily discredited. After poking some holes in Aldrich's most highly publicized tale—that of the President sneaking out of the White House late at night for trysts at a downtown Washington hotel—ABC-TV's Sam Donaldson said he'd suggested to a White House official that “maybe Aldrich is a mole of yours.”

Even some of the most rabidly anti-Clinton press, such as the *New York Post* and the *Washington Times*, were quickly compelled to distance themselves from Aldrich's ravings after a couple days of promoting the book. And for the FBI, which has labored hard to rid itself of the tainted aura of the late J. Edgar Hoover, the book was especially embarrassing.

Shades of G-man Hoover

J. Edgar Hoover, who was Aldrich's first employer at the FBI (he worked in Hoover's mail room), was famed for his alleged prudishness, his insistence that FBI special agents have short hair, be clean-shaven, and wear suits and ties at all times. Hoover was known for displaying public outrage toward any perceived sexual deviance, and he maintained files on known or suspected homosexuals in government, and on personnel who were reported to have engaged in sexual or

other misconduct. The FBI's “sexual deviate” file, indexing reports of alleged homosexuality reported between 1937 and 1977, ran to some 300,000 pages.

Hoover's puritan persona, as is well known, simply masked his own homosexuality. Although he deployed the full power of the FBI against anyone who was overheard discussing the director's proclivities, in recent years, abundant documentation has emerged concerning Hoover's own deviant activities, including his long-term homosexual relationship with aide Clyde Tolson, and his cross-dressing at drag parties thrown by Roy Cohn—at which Hoover was affectionately known as “Mary.”

Aldrich's own obsessions, on display throughout his book, are eerily reminiscent of Hoover's.

In describing his first day at the Clinton White House, Aldrich regales the reader with stories of how different it was from “the buttoned-down Bush administration.” Aldrich describes it: “the shaggy-haired middle-aged guy . . . in a loud, checkered, polyester, double-knit suit and badly scuffed shoes,” the woman “dressed like a cocktail waitress. Her shirt was too tight and ended at her midriff; her skirt was short, and she wasn't wearing any hose. . . . I saw jeans, T-shirts, and sweatshirts; men with earrings and ponytails; and every manner of footwear except normal dress shoes.” Then there was the woman whose breasts kept tumbling out of her blouse, and the young lady who bent over in front of Hillary Clinton showing her “bare behind.”

Revealing more about himself than about the Clinton White House, Aldrich confesses: “There was a unisex quality to the Clinton staff that set it far apart from the Bush administration. It was the shape of their bodies. In the Clinton administration, the broad-shouldered, pants-wearing women and the pear-shaped, bowling-pin men blurred distinctions between the sexes. I was used to athletic types, physically fit persons who took pride in body image. . . .”

Aldrich's book boils down to a collection of after-hours barroom gossip, supplemented by political slanders and attacks on Clinton lifted directly out of the *Washington Times*, the *American Spectator*, and kindred publications. Financial backing for the book was provided by Richard Mellon Scaife, whose projects otherwise include bankrolling the Vincent Foster conspiracy-theory industry; Scaife is one of the funders of the Heritage Foundation.

Aldrich also displays his particular obsessions with profanity and neatness. As with everything else, according to Aldrich, a profane word was never heard in the White House prior to its takeover by the Clinton crowd. In the Bush and Reagan administrations, everyone spoke politely, wore underwear, and polished their shoes. Of course they also traded guns for drugs in Central America and Afghanistan, dealt with terrorists in Iran and elsewhere, and then lied about it to Congress. But that's not of concern to Aldrich, who has more important things to be worry about, such as the lack of athletic bodies on display in the Clinton White House.