

house capers as crap games, poker and drinking bouts.” He “located our contraband,” recalled Dave Stephens, who had also been at Central with Edgar, “and destroyed it by sending it crashing to the concrete areaway.” “Speed chastised us with his morality,” recalled actor William Gaxton.

While the nickname Speed stuck, some students hit on a crueler one. “We men who received C’s,” said GWU alumnus C. W. Collier, ‘called Hoover, who received A’s, ‘Fatty-pants.’”

Edgar had no time for the slew of writers and thinkers then changing social and political attitudes around the world. Not for him the ideas of Freud and George Bernard Shaw, Karl Marx and John Reed, Pankhurst or Bertrand Russell. His favorite poets, he let it be known, were Edgar Guest and Vash Young and Robert Service, the re-man poet who told America that:

... only the Strong shall thrive;
That surely the weak shall perish, and only
the fit survive.

Edgar received his Bachelor of Law degree, without honors, in the summer of 1916. America, meanwhile, was moving closer to entering the war in Europe. There were problems at home—anarchist bombs, strikes, workers’ demands for shorter working hours. Henry Ford was forced to agree to equal pay for women—\$5 a day—and a woman was elected to Congress for the first time. President Wilson promised that all women would soon get the vote. Then, on April 6, 1917, after he had told Congress “the world must be made safe for democracy,” the United States declared war on Germany.

That same day, his mental health now seriously impaired, Edgar’s father gave up work for good. Though Edgar was now the highest-paid youth in his grade at the Library of Congress, the family faced penury. On July 25, when he learned he had passed his bar exams, Edgar quit the job at the Library. The next day, for a few dollars more, he began work at the Department of Justice.

Edgar would in future imply that he got the government job on his own initiative. In fact he almost certainly got it thanks, once again, to Bill Hitz. Hitz, by then a judge, had clout. He counted the President and Supreme Court Justice Brandeis among his friends, and himself held a senior post at the Justice Department. With connections like that, it was easy to find a place at Justice for a needy young relative.

Edgar would say his first post had been a “clerkship.” His personnel file describes him as having been a “Special Employee.” In fact he worked in the mail room. Bruce Bielaski, a senior official, recalled how—on the trolley to work one day in 1917—he found himself talking shop with his neighbor, mail room chief George Michaelson.

Michaelson dropped the name of a young lawyer he had sorting mail, “one of the brightest boys around.” “You don’t need anybody with brains doing that,” said Bielaski. “If you want him,” Michaelson replied, “you can have him.”

That conversation on the trolley was a fateful one for America. Bruce Bielaski was Director of the Bureau of Investigation, direct forerunner of what we know as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the FBI.

The Bureau had been created in 1908, in the face of congressional fears that its powers might be used for oppressive political ends, and that it might end up under the control of one man. It was used to probe crimes that involved the crossing of state boundaries, antitrust and banking violations, and—notoriously—offenses against the Mann Act, which made it a crime to carry a woman across state lines for “immoral purposes.”

Bureau Chief Bruce Bielaski did not forget the young man his neighbor had recommended—though he did not bring Edgar into the Bureau. Instead he told John Lord O’Brian, head of the War Emergency Division, about Edgar. On December 14, 1917, the name of “Mr. Hoover, special agent,” appeared for the first time in an O’Brian memorandum.

So, a month short of his twenty-third birthday, Edgar shot from sorting mail to deciding what to do with suspect foreigners. Three years of propaganda had brought the nation to a fever-pitch of hysteria about German spying and sabotage—although Bureau operations never caught a single spy or saboteur. It fell to the Justice Department to decide the fate of many German aliens.

The first faded memos of Edgar’s prodigious career tell their own story. A German alien aged eighteen arrested on the Texas border for mouthing support for the Kaiser—Edgar recommended detention until the end of the war. Another German called President Wilson a “a cocksucker and a thief.” Edgar recommended internment again. He was overruled, on the ground that angry talk hardly justified such drastic punishment.

In 1918 Edgar worked on a drive to register all German women