The History Professional

An Interview with John Fox

John Fox has been the Historian at the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington, DC, since 2003. He earned a Ph.D. in Modern American History from the University of New Hampshire in 2001. Dr. Fox contributes histories of the FBI and its field offices to numerous journals and publications and for the agency’s website at www.fbi.gov. He has co-authored The FBI: A Centennial History (2008) and regularly serves as the FBI’s subject-matter expert for documentaries and news services on such critical questions as the agency’s role in the Cold War, intelligence and counter-intelligence, and law and justice.

Interview by Benjamin Guterman

What were your primary historical interests in graduate school? Were they related to law enforcement issues in any way?

I entered graduate school with an interest in political/civil rights history having written my master’s thesis on the political thought of Frederick Douglass. As I pursued my classes, I became more interested in the Progressive Era in a broad sense and moved afield from a focus on civil rights history. While walking out of my oral exams, one of my professors suggested that I didn’t seem too enthused with my dissertation topic and offered me his collection of files on an old FBI spy case. I was hooked.

On your arrival at the FBI, how did you identify and organize your program priorities and goals? Were there any specific and urgent needs?

I entered the FBI in 1999 as a FOIA disclosure analyst and hoped that I could convince the Bureau that it needed a historian; they hadn’t had one since 1992, when Dr. Susan Rosenfeld left. I was surprised when the Office of Public and Congressional Affairs, as it was then called, reopened the hunt for a historian soon after I started and completely unaware of my hopes. I applied and didn’t get the job as I hadn’t yet finished my dissertation. However, I was offered a job organizing a collection of historical material, with the chance to work with the historian when hired: I jumped at the opportunity. They didn’t find an appropriate candidate, and reopened the search a couple of years after I defended.

At first, we did not have a specific history program here. Over the years, I have built one up, working from what Dr. Rosenfeld and others had done. This has included re-writing the Guide to Conducting Research in FBI Records and updating short histories, chronologies, and a number of heritage and leadership materials. I also played a central role in preparations for the Bureau recognition of its centenary in 2008 and preparation of transition materials for changing leaders, and provided subject-matter expertise on new and revised training programs and many similar projects.

What are your core responsibilities, and in what ways might your historical duties be unique or require particular care?

My position is in the Office of Public Affairs, so its primary purpose is to explain the work of the FBI in historical context to audiences inside and outside of the Bureau. These duties range from assisting students working on their History Day projects to advising academics researching their latest monograph to the public wanting to know more about a case or person in FBI history—sometimes UFOs, but more often interesting and complex historical questions.

I also deal with the media on a periodic basis. When Mark Felt came out as “Deep Throat,” or when some other history matter makes the news, I provide context and background to a wide range of journalists.

I pursue research projects, small and large, for internal groups. Some of these are projects on my own initiative, like the history of the pre-Hoover Bureau that I am writing. I regularly write stories for FBI.gov: liaise with our Records Information Dissemination Section and many others trying to work through the FBI FOIA process; and, give talks to diverse groups ranging from history students, to alumni organizations, to academic conferences.

You serve as a subject-matter expert and liaison to the ongoing “G-Men and Journalists” exhibit at the Newseum, in Washington, DC. What are your contributions there?

In 2007, the FBI was beginning to prepare for its centenary anniversary. Our public tour had been closed for some time, and we wanted a venue to display some of our most significant artifacts. We looked at several options, but length of time to develop the project and proposed costs eliminated them from consideration. The Newseum, a 501c3 organization, was interested in hosting a temporary exhibit, and their proposed schedule and ability to carry the costs of producing it met our needs. I became part of the FBI team that provided subject-matter expertise, advice in the development of the exhibit, and related audio/visual material. It was so successful that it is still running there, more than four years longer than originally planned.

What have you learned about the pre-Hoover Bureau, prior to 1924—its identity and general functions?

My research has suggested a number of things about the Bureau’s origins that will be of interest to historians. First, the Bureau was not founded contrary to congressional will and as a blight on American liberties, as often portrayed. It was created in the midst of a power-struggle between the President and Congress in a settlement more about ego and political payback, during which serious issues of government power and American rights were
raised in passing. Teddy Roosevelt was a lame-duck President looking to tweak the nose of Congress on his way out; Congress, smarting from TR’s enlargement of executive power at its expense, was not in the mood to be slighted as the President left office. It had little to do with how the Department of Justice used detectives and only a bit to do with the questionable use of U.S. Secret Service detectives by other agencies. The FBI was born from a small organizational experiment to deal with a political impasse. Had Roosevelt not insulted Congress, the agency’s birth would have been accepted without issue or the executive/legislative mud-fight that accompanied it. The later historical gloss of how Congress feared “systems of espionage” and Napoleonic abuses of rights and liberties is overdrawn and tertiary to the matter.

Second, improved understanding of the early Bureau sharpens our insights into its evolution—which aspects of Hoover’s tenure built upon earlier foundations and which ones he innovated.

**How should we view the legacy of Director J. Edgar Hoover and his lasting effect on the Bureau?**

Hoover’s tenure was unparalleled in U.S. bureaucratic history, and explaining his impact, good and bad, is a significant part of what I do. On the one hand, he guided the growth and maturation of the Bureau into the preeminent law enforcement and national security organization in the world. On the other, his abuses, especially in the 1960s, set a warning point, a marker, beyond which the FBI can seriously violate constitutional protections and harm the interests of the American people. Looking at Hoover’s successes and failures (and those of the organization that he led for 48 years) is key to understanding wider truths about the unique nature and dynamics of American government and the desires of the American people for liberty and security.

**You’ve researched the changing applications and capabilities of FBI intelligence analysis over time. Undoubtedly, we’ve seen revolutionary changes there, correct?**

The FBI has been involved in U.S. intelligence matters since its creation and has played an important part in the growth of American intelligence collection and its application. Unlike at the CIA, though, intelligence analysis did not develop into a significant discipline in the FBI. It was handled tactically, providing support to FBI case actions, rather than for building a strategic picture of the threats the Bureau faced or contributing to the efforts of the wider intelligence community to do the same. After 9/11 the FBI made major strides in remaking its approach to analysis and integrating it across the Bureau, thus building on its historical ability to collect and act on intelligence, while building a professional analytic capability to help the Bureau and the wider intelligence community to better see the threats they face. How much is revolution and how much is evolution, I think, is a matter to settle at a later vantage point.

**The FBI has always been tasked with domestic law enforcement yet was secretly involved in counter-intelligence work on the VENONA Project from 1943 to 1980. Generally, what were the agency’s contributions there, and how well did it work with the CIA?**

The FBI’s work on counterintelligence was not secret, though aspects of its work, like Venona, most certainly were. Venona is the name that we use for a joint Army/FBI, later NSA-CIA-FBI-British-Canadian-Australian effort to decrypt and decode USSR telegrams sent during World War II. The ability to read a portion of those messages was a counterintelligence bonanza for the United States and its allies.

The issue of FBI-CIA cooperation has been much written about, and usually negatively. My research suggests that, more often than not, the two agencies worked pretty well together over the course of the Cold War. There were certainly periods of conflict—the beginning of the CIA and in the early 1970s for instance—and there were certainly differences in the organizational cultures and missions of the two agencies. Such differences are to be expected: the CIA’s purpose is to gather intelligence outside of U.S. borders, while the FBI’s is to enforce U.S. laws here at home. That said, there are significant overlaps and areas wherein cooperation is necessary and beneficial—e.g., when the FBI unearths a foreign spy here whose activities are of interest to the CIA in understanding what the spy’s agency wants to know about us. Or from the other side, the work of the CIA often reveals information about criminal activities occurring overseas that impact U.S. interests here and abroad.

**Post–9/11, do you think that the FBI’s domestic counter-terrorism duties have permanently redefined the agency’s work and mission?**

The FBI had declared counterterrorism as a top priority in the late 1970s, and its work over the 1980s and 1990s showed many successful investigations following from that focus. 9/11, though, revealed areas of FBI policy and practice that needed to change, and significant reform followed. The scope of the 9/11 investigation was unparalleled, and the pace of change was rapid (though not unique in Bureau history). Although I can suggest areas that are likely to prove historically significant—like improving the status and treatment of intelligence analysts as third-class employees (i.e., agent, analyst, and professional support)—we are still working through these changes, and so I will leave their historical significance to be noted by those who come after me and can look back on the changes with greater historical perspective.

**To what extent, and in what kinds of duties, do you use classified FBI records in your work, and what precautions must you observe?**

Although my position is in public affairs and much of my research is on unclassified matters, I do need to use unreleased, sensitive, and even classified records from time to time. If I have needed a record to pursue the question I am seeking to answer, I
have been able to get access to the records that I need. Unlike many of my fellow historians in the Intelligence Community, much of what the FBI does is not classified, and so I tend to have more opportunity to talk about full range of things the FBI has been involved in over the last 106 years.

**Do you have two or three research projects that have interested you the most?**

I became interested in the FBI because of one of its old spy cases, and so the history of intelligence/counterintelligence has been my primary interest. I have also been returning to my graduate school roots in the Progressive Era and its politics through my study of the Bureau’s creation and early growth. That said, the FBI has such a wide range of responsibilities that I am asked to explain, provide context on, or conduct research in something different every day. On one day, I work on counterintelligence in the early Cold War; on another, Civil Rights enforcement in the 1960s; and on another, serial killers in the 1980s. Next week it will be different, and I look forward to what will be asked of me.

**Your website has become an important outreach tool. What are the most important resources and informational aids that you provide on the site?**

The key collection of digitized FBI files on the FBI’s web site is our electronic FOIA reading room, The Vault (vault.fbi.gov). It has hundreds of thousands of pages of old and new FOIA-released FBI files, from the 1920s Osage Indian murder investigation to documents that talk about our use of GPS tools in surveillance today. There are also a number of other useful sites that post old FBI records. Governmentattic.org and archive.org both have large collections of FBI FOIA releases. And the National Archives and its branches have millions of pages of FBI records, many of which are available for immediate access. As the FBI did not accession its non-current records to NARA for many years, even more of what NARA now holds is not immediately available, but will be in the future. There is material enough to occupy the research interests of generations of historians and students, even if it will take some time to access.

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**Employment Notes**

A sampling of recent listings at USAJobs.gov.

**Smithsonian Institution, Supervisory Museum Curator**

Job Announcement Number: 14A-MR-299567A-DEU-NMAH

GS-1015-14 Open through August 18, 2014

This position is located in the Division of Medicine and Science within the National Museum of American History (NMAH). The employee serves as the Division Chair (Medicine & Science) and is responsible for carrying out the research, collections management, exhibitions development and education to meet the mission of the museum.

**Department of the Air Force, Assistant Professor of Military and Strategic Studies**

Job Announcement Number: 14-23DFMI

The incumbent will be expected to teach one and possibly both of DFMI’s two core (required) courses, Airpower and the Military Profession and Joint Operations Strategy and Technology. Airpower and the Military Profession provides sophomore cadets their professional cornerstone course in military air, space, and cyberspace strategy and operations.

**Department of the Interior, Multidisciplinary (Cultural Resources)**

Job Announcement Number: BR-MP-2014-216

Prepares or oversees the preparation of cultural resources sections of environmental documents including categorical exclusions, environmental assessments, and environmental impact statements. Prepares context statements, site records, determinations of eligibility, and other reports for historic structures, buildings, features, and sites affected by Reclamation programs.

**Department of the Army, U.S. Army Medical Command Exhibits Specialist**

Job Announcement Number: NCFR149997591157484D

Work involves planning, constructing, installing, and operating exhibits, the preparation of gallery space for exhibits, the preservation of historic buildings, or the restoration of items to be exhibited. Uses a combination of artistic abilities, technical knowledge and skills, and ability to understand the subject matter concepts, which assigned exhibits projects are intended to convey. Plans and designs museum exhibits, prepares exhibits, displays, publications and presentation materials and assists the Museum Curators with security, conservation of collections as an Exhibits Specialist.

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**A Timeline of Federal History**

A timeline of dates important for federal history work is now online at [http://shfg.org/shfg/programs/resources/timeline-of-federal-history/](http://shfg.org/shfg/programs/resources/timeline-of-federal-history/)

Please send comments and suggestions for additional dates to webmaster@shfg.org.

*The National Archives under construction, May 1, 1934*