

Leonardo DiCaprio Embodies the G-Man in ‘J. Edgar’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Much of history is determined by the petty quirks and strange psychosis of “great leaders.” J. Edgar Hoover, FBI director for 48 years, worked hard to hide his very nature by squelching the nature of others – enemies, friends and perceived enemies. Leonardo DiCaprio is Hoover in “J. Edgar.”

This is director Clint Eastwood’s history of J. Edgar Hoover the man, and Hoover as the director of a shadow government of the United States through the FBI. Using U.S. tax dollars, Hoover built an impenetrable wall of power, based on his concept of law and order, with no repercussions toward himself, despite a closeted life of vague sexuality. Leonardo DiCaprio captures all the duality, hypocrisy and fear that Hoover possessed, in a performance that unabashedly communicates the multi-faceted megalomaniac.

The film begins with an older J. Edgar Hoover (DiCaprio, in all ages), around the time of the John F. Kennedy administration. He feels the grip of the Kennedys on his office, including Attorney General Robert (Jeffrey Donovan). To counteract this pressure, he begins to dictate his memoirs. This is the basis for the story, as the history jumps around from an old to young Hoover, Director of the FBI under a succession of U.S. Presidents, from Calvin Coolidge to Richard Nixon.



On the Case: Leonardo DiCaprio as Hoover and Armie Hammer as Clyde Tolson in ‘J. Edgar’
Photo credit: Keith Bernstein for Warner Bros. Pictures

Hoover's history includes his mother (Judi Dench), a firm matriarch who took a boy with a speech impediment and forced him into manhood. Helen Gandy (Naomi Watts), is Hoover's loyal secretary, a co-conspirator on the maintenance of his power, keeping secret files on his detractors. Clyde Tolson (Armie Hammer) is Hoover's second-in-command, a constant companion and presence in his life, a relationship that has been viewed in many ways through the prism of history. From his takeover of the Bureau in 1924, to his death in 1972, J. Edgar Hoover was a life as a contradiction in terms.

DiCaprio displays his full gifts as an actor in his incorporation of J. Edgar. He channels his understanding of this conflicted soul to the audience, a balled up fist of shame and unhappiness. Director Clint Eastwood takes the literate script of Dustin Lance Black ("Milk") and sets DiCaprio loose within it. The cadence of Hoover's speech pattern is one of his great captures, for within the speech pattern of the man they derided as "Speedy," is the determination which made him one of the most powerful men in U.S. history. This is about control, the control that builds power, fights crime, defeats enemies and creates a lie of the mind.

It was Hoover that pressed the Bureau into the 20th Century, through the centerpiece case of the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, and the film effectively uses the infamous event as Hoover's personality barometer. Charles Lindbergh (Josh Lucas), an aviator who was one of the most famous men of the 1920s, had his child abducted from his home in 1932. Hoover's involvement in the case exposes both his insecurity and determination, and it is his insistence on modern forensics that cracks the case. The film keeps going back to the kidnapping, exposing the obsession in both the desperate need to solve it, and for Hoover to bask in the glory.

His relationship with Clyde Tolson, for years the stuff of mythic conjecture, is speculatively explored in "J. Edgar." Armie Hammer – who famously played the Winklevoss twins in "The Social Network" – plays Tolson as a conscience to Hoover, the man who is loyal yet challenging. It is Tolson who knows what he wants, in contrast to the conflicted soul of J. Edgar. If there is any way to handle that conflict sensitively, Eastwood found it. The director explored the reasoning behind such a damaged individual, not the sensationalism associated with it.



Dear Old Mom: Leonardo DiCaprio and Judi Dench in 'J. Edgar'
Photo credit: Keith Bernstein for Warner Bros. Pictures

The film had echoes of "Citizen Kane," except Hoover is a real American, not a fictional combination like Kane. The flashbacks, staggered timelines and method of narration – through the specious memoir that Hoover is dictating – had the Orson Wellesian flavor, and it was yet another good choice by Eastwood and the screenwriter Black to flesh out their subject. Like Charles Foster Kane, J. Edgar Hoover had many pieces to his puzzle, and even when it was put together it wasn't a complete picture.

The film is also a sad reminder of how many resources, money and information are wasted by men of power. Hoover used law enforcement mainly to mollify his own petty views of society, while at the same time hiding his own shame. More damage is done by these type of "Great Americans," than any terrorism or war.

"J. Edgar" opens everywhere on November 3rd. Featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, Josh Hamilton, Naomi Watts, Judi Dench, Armie Hammer, Josh Lucas and Jeffrey Donovan. Screenplay by Dustin Lance Black. Directed by Clint Eastwood. Rated "R"



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