Matthew Cecil

"Monotonous Tale": Legitimacy, Public Relations, and the Shooting of a Public Enemy

On April 6, 1939, FBI agents shot and killed America's "Public Enemy Number One" as he exited a St. Louis hamburger shop. Agents on the scene claimed the man, Ben Dickson, refused to surrender and threatened agents with two guns he carried. FBI documents and witness accounts, however, show that Dickson was shot in the back as he tried to run away from agents. Confronted by critics in the news media who questioned the legitimacy of the shooting, FBI officials in Washington worked with agents on the scene to concoct a version of events more amenable to the heroic media portrayals they preferred. Using FBI files released under the Freedom of Information Act and media accounts, this study explores the bureau's behind-the-scenes work to legitimize the shooting and its use of the revised version of events as a public relations device demonstrating the bureau's responsibility and utility.

Keywords: *FBI; public relations; legitimacy; Dickson; J. Edgar Hoover*

On April 6, 1939, FBI agents shot and killed America's "Public Enemy Number One" as he exited a St. Louis hamburger shop. With his seventeen-year-old wife Stella Mae, Ben Dickson, twenty-seven, robbed two South Dakota banks in the fall of 1938, getting away with more than $17,000.[1] They were accused of kidnapping two men in Indiana and stealing several cars during a six-month run from justice that saw them crisscross the heartland and finally settle briefly in New Orleans. According to the FBI, Dickson was killed only after he refused to give himself up when confronted outside the Yankee System Hamburger Shop on Euclid Avenue in St. Louis near Forest Park (FBI 7-2561).[2] According to the bureau, the Dickson shooting was simply an example of FBI agents' reluctantly dispatching a craven and violent criminal who had pledged not to be taken alive.

A witness report and internal FBI documents suggest the circumstances of the shooting were much different and far less heroic than the bureau's preferred public version of events. The witness claimed, and internal FBI

Journal of Communication Inquiry 28:2 (April 2004): 157-170
DOI: 10.1177/0196859903261796

documents corroborate the claim, that Dickson was shot in the back as he tried to run away from the agents who confronted him. Because of the bureau's systematic public relations and information-management efforts, coordinated by top officials in Washington, the FBI's version of Dickson's killing became national news. Most stories and editorials reproduced the FBI's preferred message, praising the bureau for once again proving its worth as the indispensable leader of the nation's war on crime. One editorial writer, however, saw the shooting as another in a disturbing trend in which FBI agents shot first and asked questions later. In an editorial headlined "Monotonous Tale" and published April 9, 1939, John W. Owens of the *Baltimore Sun* questioned the legitimacy of the bureau's actions:

> Curiously enough, local policemen and detectives rarely find it necessary to shoot and kill the desperadoes with whom they frequently deal. Now and then they shoot down some fool who tries to escape. Usually, however, they bring in the prisoner intact. He is duly indicted, tried and, if found guilty, is sentenced to proper punishment. The ends of justice are thus served in an orderly and decent way. We don't pretend to know why the G-men so frequently find it necessary to kill.

Owens's editorial directly questioned the legitimacy of bureau actions in the Dickson case and implicitly criticized the bureau's responsibility and utility as a law enforcement agency. Such criticisms were rare during the Hoover era but typically questioned either the bureau's actions in a particular case or the institutional legitimacy of a highly centralized federal police force.

An examination of the more than 5,200-page Dickson FBI file and contemporaneous news reports from St. Louis, Kansas City, Topeka, and New York newspapers found that in the hours and days following the shooting, top FBI public relations officials successfully altered the facts and manipulated media portrayals of the case to assure that the action of its agents would be found legitimate and even heroic. Once the responsibility of the bureau's actions in the shooting had been established, despite both witness accounts and bureau documents indicating the shooting was a rash and unnecessary act, the FBI was able to continue embellishing the sanitized version of events. The revised Dickson shooting, a heroic tale eliminating all potentially embarrassing details, reappeared for decades in news releases, radio scripts, and authorized books written or vetted by the FBI public relations staff. What was potentially a damning indictment of the bureau's actions and potential for abuse of power became, through systematic public relations efforts, a demonstration of the bureau's continuing legitimacy to an American public historically skeptical of centralized federal police power. The Dickson case demonstrates the awesome power of government agencies, particularly agencies that employ secrecy and

subterfuge as public relations strategies, to manipulate public opinion and undermine civil liberties and democracy.

Actional and Institutional Legitimation

The main question confronting the FBI during Hoover's forty-eight-year directorship was an overarching question of legitimacy. Concerns about the concentration of power in the hands of a few have driven events in U.S. history since the nation's founding. The United States was founded following a revolution overthrowing a "tyrannical" monarch. The first U.S. government, the anemic, decentralized Articles of Confederation, embodied the national concern about concentration of power in the hands of a few. The debate over balancing state's rights and federal power led the United States to fight the Civil War. In that context, the FBI, which consolidated sweeping powers and jurisdiction in law enforcement, faced questions about its exercise of power, and thus its legitimacy, from the agency's beginning in 1908.

An organization is generally considered legitimate if its output is compatible with society's value patterns (Stillman 1974, 39). More specifically, an institution is considered legitimate if publics perceive it as responsible and useful and as acting in concord with public values (Epstein 1972, 1701-17; Francesconi 1982, 47-59). Institutions that demonstrate responsibility and utility through their actions and public communication over time may lessen the likelihood of criticism based on perceptions of a power imbalance between the institution and the individuals in society (Turkel 1982, 165-89). Publics might, for example, accept mistakes or errors of judgment more readily if an organization has demonstrated its utility and responsibility over time. Mistakes by organizations that had established legitimacy would be viewed by the public as simply aberrations rather than as challenges to the continued viability of the organization. Legitimation strategies, in essence, employ public-communication strategies to lessen concerns about the potential for the irresponsible exercise of power.

The FBI's need for public legitimation during the Hoover era was rooted in the bureau's beginnings. Questions of the organization's legitimacy, based in a fear of centralized federal power, have faced the bureau since its founding in 1908. Objections to a federal police force were so strong in the early twentieth century that Congress attempted to ban an existing practice of borrowing Treasury Department agents for Justice Department investigations (Lewis 1980, 94). Founded by executive order in 1908, the unnamed investigative bureau included just twenty-two agents who were empowered to provide limited investigation services for the Justice Department, which had previously relied on other federal agencies, including the Secret Service, for investigative work

(Theoharis 1994, xi). That modest complement of agents grew to thirty-four by 1909, and the organization received its name, the Bureau of Investigation, that year. Prior to the 1930s, the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Investigation was severely limited. Agents were investigators only and were not empowered to carry weapons or to make arrests. Between 1909 and 1917, agents of the Bureau of Investigation investigated alleged cases of white slavery, smuggling, and neutrality violations (Theoharis 1999, 109-10).

On July 26, 1917, Hoover, a twenty-two-year-old Washington, D.C., native and former Library of Congress clerk, joined the Department of Justice as an intelligence clerk at a salary of $1,200 annually (Powers 1987, 43-44; Theoharis and Cox 1988, 46). Hoover was quickly promoted to special assistant attorney general in charge of the Alien Enemies Registration Section, spearheading the government's drive to foster national conformity during the war (Theoharis and Cox 1988, 47). It was in that capacity that in 1919 and 1920 Hoover and the Bureau of Investigation played a central role in implementing Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's antiradical crusade, which has become known as the Red Scare. The mass roundup of suspected radicals provided the Bureau of Investigation with its first major press notices and eventually with its first extensive public criticism. On January 2, 1920, about 10,000 suspected anarchists and other radicals were arrested, and 6,500 of those were immediately released after questioning revealed they were falsely accused.

After further investigation, only a handful of the detainees were deported. Members of Congress, already skeptical of the federalization of police powers, became outspoken critics of the Red Scare's antiradical roundups. Hoover, well known as the organizer of the crusade, proved his bureaucratic and political savvy by avoiding the repercussions of the Red Scare. Palmer received most of the blame, and Hoover continued in his position as an assistant director of the bureau in charge of antiradical activities.

In the years following the Red Scare, Hoover oversaw a halving of the size of the bureau, a response to the legitimacy concerns raised after the 1920 raids. The reductions provide further evidence of American ambivalence about federal law enforcement. Attorney General Harlan F. Stone appointed Hoover director in 1924, a position he held for forty-eight years, until his death (Powers 1987, 144). Hoover shifted his bureau's enemies, from gangsters in the 1930s, to spies in the 1940s, to communists in the 1950s and 1960s. For most of Hoover's tenure, his FBI stood at the center of American society and culture. His bureau's excesses have been well documented and range from political surveillance to intimidation and even blackmail.[3]

Legitimacy questions hounded the bureau throughout his tenure. The assurance of responsibility in response to challenges that questioned the legitimacy of the bureau was a project of FBI public relations beginning in the 1930s.

While the overarching question of legitimacy overlaid bureau actions and public communication throughout the Hoover era, FBI use of public relations as a legitimation strategy was most evident in crisis situations. The use of public relations in response to potential criticism during a communication crisis that is not a fundamental challenge to the existence of the institution has been termed *actional legitimation* (Boyd 2000, 341-53):

> If institutional legitimacy matters at the macrolevel of analysis, actional legitimacy matters at a microlevel of analysis. Actional legitimacy is achieved when an action is perceived by publics as being undertaken within the institution's realm of authority and thus inspires public confidence in the institution. (p. 348)

Actional legitimation strategies as evidenced in public relations messages focus on establishing either the responsibility or the legitimacy of an organization's actions (p. 349).

The FBI's handling of the shooting of public enemy Ben Dickson demonstrates the lengths to which the bureau would go to anticipate challenges to its actional legitimacy and how it altered the public record so that the "heroic shooting" of a public enemy could be used again and again over time to demonstrate the bureau's utility and responsibility.

Monotonous Tale

Ben and Stella Mae Dickson robbed two South Dakota banks in the fall of 1938. By the spring of 1939, they had been sought as public enemies by Hoover's FBI for more than six months. Just before 7 p.m. on April 6, 1939, Ben Dickson and Stella Mae Dickson arrived at the Yankee System Hamburger Shop in midtown St. Louis. The neighborhood included two major luxury hotels, two large hospitals, and many small shops and restaurants in addition to nearby Forest Park. In good weather, the Euclid Avenue area was a hub of activity (FBI 7-2561-604X). Ben Dickson parked the car on the west side of Euclid Avenue, one block south of intersecting Laclede Avenue (FBI 7-2561-604X, 4). Dickson was in St. Louis to meet a woman named Naomi, whose surname has been redacted in FBI files detailing that day. Naomi was the sister of a man Dickson had served time with in the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, and the meeting had been arranged a month before. Dickson carried money intended to aid Naomi's ill mother (FBI 7-2561-897, 14).

Dickson was heavily armed, with two loaded guns stuffed in the waistband of his pants under his jacket and a knife concealed in his pocket. He arrived at the shop and met Naomi, who was seated at the counter and dressed in brown with a stylish black hat that nearly covered her eyes (FBI 7-2561-604, 1). The

waitress that day, a witness to events that followed, was nineteen-year-old Gloria Cambron (FBI 7-2561-604X, 1).

Outside the shop, three special agents, led by Special Agent in Charge of the St. Louis Office, Gerald B. Norris, watched and waited. Norris had learned of Dickson's meeting with Naomi hours earlier but had only been notified of the location about fifteen minutes earlier when Naomi had called (FBI 7-2561-604X, 1). Norris contacted the only available special agents from his staff, Louis Cochran, Pierce Pratt, and John Bush, and met them at a barbershop across the street just moments before Dickson arrived. Published accounts quoting Norris and Hoover later denied that Naomi, identified by the press in a reference to the shooting of John Dillinger as "the woman in brown," was an informant for the bureau. That was the first of many discrepancies in bureau accounts of the Dickson shooting. News reporters drew parallels between the "woman in red," Anna Sage, who led the bureau to Dillinger, and Dickson's "woman in brown." FBI documents confirm that Naomi was an FBI informant and was paid between $2,500 and $5,000 for her assistance in locating Dickson (FBI 7-2561-616, 2; FBI 7-2561-5). In the aftermath of the shooting, FBI officials publicly denied any involvement of a paid informant in breaking the case.

Before Dickson could be confronted, his identity had to be positively established. Norris strolled by the shop window and peered in. "He [Dickson] went in and sat down, but we did not go in there, but walked by the stand for the purpose of being sure of the identification, and we had an opportunity of seeing him full in the face," Norris testified at the Coroner's Inquest. "His hat was put up a little bit, you could look him in the face, and it was rather certain it was Dickson" (St. Louis City Coroner 1939, 8). Norris twice walked past the window of the shop, peering in at Dickson, who was seated with Naomi at the counter, facing the window (FBI 7-2561-616, 2). Once he was certain that the man in the shop was Dickson, he began making plans for the capture. Concerned that the crowd on the street might be endangered if they simply waited for Dickson to emerge, the agents decided to enter the shop and pin Dickson's arms behind his back. While the agents were making plans, Dickson and Naomi emerged from the shop. When he came out, the four special agents were clustered near the southwest corner of the hamburger shop, facing generally north toward the door. The agents moved through the crowd toward Dickson, identified themselves as federal agents and told him to surrender (FBI 7-2561-616, 2-3).

Differing accounts of what happened next can be found in newspaper and FBI accounts and are significant because they demonstrate an acute awareness of actional legitimacy concerns on the part of the bureau as well as the willingness of the news media to accept bureau accounts uncritically. In addition to

the heroic version of the shooting that would emerge in the media, a second account was provided by the only citizen witness to come forward, waitress Gloria Cambron. The FBI claimed in news releases widely published by news organizations across the nation that Dickson emerged from the shop, crouched, and reached for his weapons, prompting the agents to open fire. The killing was justified, according to FBI statements published on April 7, 1939, in the *Topeka Daily Capital*, as an act of self-defense, a wholly legitimate action by federal agents whose lives were in grave danger. According to Norris's testimony at the St. Louis City Coroner's Inquest two days after the shooting, Dickson had "crouched over and swung around as though he were heading into a position to fire at us and kill us" (St. Louis City Coroner 1939, 12-13).

Most newspaper reporters accepted the bureau's version of events without question. *The St. Louis Daily Globe and Democrat* reported on April 7 that Dickson was surprised by the agents and "started to draw one of his revolvers" before he was shot. The Associated Press story, carried in the April 7 *Topeka Daily Capitol*, led with a highly dramatized portrayal of the shooting, quoting Norris as shouting, "We're federal agents and you're under arrest," before "Dickson's hands flashed toward his guns" and he was shot. The largest newspaper in South Dakota, where Dickson had robbed two banks, the *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, reported on April 7 that Dickson "grabbed for his guns" before being shot.

The incident as recalled by Cambron challenged those stories and questioned the responsibility of the agents' actions on the scene in several ways. First, the official account did not mention a woman companion, yet Cambron told reporters and testified at a St. Louis City Coroner's Inquest that a "woman in brown" (the paid informant, Naomi) had met Dickson at the shop (St. Louis City Coroner 1939, 11-18).

The notion of paying an informant for information did not fit the FBI's image as a master detective agency. More important, Cambron contradicted Norris's claim that Dickson had threatened to shoot the agents. The April 7 *Topeka Daily Capital* reported that Cambron saw Dickson leave the shop and turn to run away when confronted by Norris and the others. He moved quickly to the door just north of the shop that led to an apartment upstairs, she said. It was as Dickson struggled to open the locked door, according to Cambron, that two bullets felled him.

FBI memoranda corroborate Cambron's version of the story. In a "Personal and Confidential" letter to Hoover, Norris recounted the shooting and described the wounds Dickson received. "Agent [name withheld, probably John Bush] shot him twice in the body, one bullet entering his shoulder and going down through his body toward the front of and the other going from one

side of his body to the other" (FBI 7-2561-604X, 3). The bullet that struck Dickson in the side entered under his right arm and also passed toward the front of his body (FBI 7-2561-604X, 3). If, as bureau officials publicly claimed, Dickson was crouching directly in front of the agents, reaching for his weapons, it seems unlikely that the bullets could have had trajectories from side-to-side or back-to-front. If, however, Dickson was attempting to open the apartment door to the north of the shop, as Cambron reported, he would have been turned in such a way that the agents approaching from the south (Dickson's right) might have fired bullets that struck with the described trajectories. In addition, Norris's letter revealed that only one agent fired his weapon in the incident, begging the question, Why would only one of four experienced agents have felt threatened enough to fire had Dickson been crouching and pulling out his weapon? FBI officials preferred that such questions of the actional legitimacy of the shooting not be raised and acted accordingly in their efforts to reshape the circumstances of the shooting.

St. Louis police found the incident sufficiently suspicious that two special agents were placed under what Norris described to his superiors as "technical arrest" by officers arriving at the scene (FBI 7-2561-618X, 1). Sensing a threat to the bureau's heroic public image, Norris refused to answer the officers' questions until he had consulted with his superiors in Washington, D.C. "All of this information," Norris told Hoover, "was furnished to the bureau before it was given out to any other sources" (FBI 7-2561-604X, 5). Norris called Assistant Director Edward A. Tamm, who later became a distinguished jurist as a member of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. Tamm and Norris consulted immediately following the shooting and several more times the next day. In their initial conversation, Tamm expressed concerns about the technical arrest charges and about the coroner's inquest scheduled for April 8. Tamm told Norris

> that each man should testify that he can not [*sic*] say as to who fired the fatal shots. . . . I requested Mr. Norris to be careful to make clear when the inquest is held at nine o'clock tomorrow morning that Dickson was recognized by all the agents when he came out of the hamburger stand; that he was called upon to surrender, . . . and was killed when he attempted to draw his pistol after refusing to give himself up. (FBI 7-2561-618X, 1-2)

FBI officials knew very well that only one agent (probably Bush) had fired his weapon that day. Even a cursory investigation by St. Louis authorities would have determined the shooter. The self-defense statement, along with a strategy to obscure the identity of the shooter, circumvented any potential challenges to the legitimacy of the shooting. Hoover, with characteristic bravado, expressed his own lack of concern with the legalistic details of the shoot-

ing in a handwritten note at the bottom of Tamm's memorandum: "I see no reason for us to try to placate the local authorities. Our men had a job to do, they did it, and the criminal was killed in the act of pulling a gun. Tell Norris to stand up and not be apologetic to anyone."[4]

Tamm and Norris were not so sure that Hoover's defiant strategy would be effective. They took further steps to assure that the shooting would be found justified. Norris enlisted the aid of the St. Louis United States Attorney, who spoke to local prosecutors to "arrange" a favorable hearing at the coroner's inquest (FBI 7-2561-619, 1). In addition, agents coached St. Louis Police Department officers who testified at the hearing about Dickson's alleged criminal hearing. The officers alleged that Dickson was well known as a bloodthirsty "murderer," when in fact, none of his prior crimes even included the firing of a weapon (St. Louis City Coroner 1939, 8). Tamm's memorandum clearly suggests that the agents lie about the shooting at the inquest:

> I requested Mr. Norris to be careful to make clear when the inquest is held that Dickson was recognized by all of the agents when he came out of the hamburger stand; that he was called upon to surrender, the agents identifying themselves as Federal Officers, and was killed when he attempted to draw his pistol after refusing to give himself up. I stated that the Coroner's attention should be drawn for [*sic*] Dickson's reputation for having shot it out on previous occasions. (FBI 7-2561-619, 2)

There remained one challenge to the actional legitimacy of the shooting: the citizen witness, Cambron. By April 8, Cambron had told her story several times, maintaining that Dickson was shot after being identified by a "woman in brown" and as he tried to run away from the agents. Cambron was scheduled to testify at the inquest (FBI 7-2561-735X, 1). Tamm had a remedy:

> I told Mr. Norris that this woman should be brought into the office and given a good scare and that she should be told that she has been quoted in the newspapers as telling some stores [*sic*] that were not true and that if we are going to have to prosecute her for perjury or something, we will do so. (FBI 7-2561-729, 2)

Cambron stopped talking to reporters and did not repeat what she had witnessed when questioned at the inquest. The silencing of Cambron, along with a favorable report from the coroner, eliminated questions of actional legitimacy in the shooting of Dickson. Dickson's young wife Stella Mae was captured several days later in Kansas City and later served ten years in West Virginia and Texas federal women's prisons. She concealed her past from acquaintances and neighbors and lived a quiet life in Kansas City until she died in 1995 from complications of emphysema (Sharon Michaels, personal communication, September 10, 1995).

At the time of the shooting, there were a few public challenges to the bureau's actional legitimacy as a few journalists expressed concerns about the FBI's lack of restraint and raised age-old questions about the wisdom of a federalized police force. Typically, however, journalists working closely with the FBI's highly centralized publicity section agreed to various limitations, including prior restraint and expectations of positive coverage, in return for access to the bureau and its cache of valuable information. Those who chose to disagree publicly found their access cut off and, in cases where the bureau's fundamental legitimacy was put in question, faced with counterattacks by Hoover. *Baltimore Sun* editor Owens was critical of the bureau's recklessness in his editorial "Monotonous Tale":

> In the case of Benny Dickson, the man whom they got yesterday, one G-man at least was with him in the restaurant where he had his last mortal meal. One would think that a tap with a blackjack might have been feasible. Or that a revolver leveled at him might have persuaded him that resistance was useless. As we say, we don't pretend to know. But we do know that a killing by G-men, however quick, cheap and effective, is not the method provided by law for disposing of criminals.

By rhetorically contrasting the bureau with local officials, Owen's editorial not only placed the actional legitimacy of the shooting of Dickson in question but also alluded to questions of the institutional legitimacy of a powerful and highly centralized federal police force. The swift and strident FBI response to the *Sun* editorial indicated how seriously the bureau took such attacks on its legitimacy. Within one week, Hoover addressed a five-page letter to Owen, petulantly countering each point of the editorial, sentence by sentence.

Four times Hoover's letter restated the bureau assertion that Dickson was killed while "resisting arrest." Hoover added two dramatic details not found in any other FBI source, suggesting that as he lay dying on the pavement, Dickson "endeavored to secure one of his weapons, but his failing strength was not sufficient to consummate the threat he had previously made." By all accounts of those at the scene, Dickson made no such move. Furthermore, Hoover claimed, Dickson had made a pact with his "associates" that he would not be taken alive (FBI 7-2561-766X, 1-3). Dickson's only associate was his teenaged wife Stella Mae, and her statements to FBI agents in the days after her capture said nothing of any desperate plan to fight to the death (FBI 29-100-651, 3-10). In addition to the lengthy letter to Owens, Hoover engaged friends and supporters in the news media to attack Owens and the *Sun*. One of Hoover's most reliable journalist supporters was Jack Carley, associate editor of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* (Tennessee). On April 9, 1939, Carley

published an editorial both touting the actional legitimacy of the shooting and implicitly supporting the bureau's institutional legitimacy:

> When the Federal Bureau of Investigation pins the label of public enemy on a man he can expect one of two things: imprisonment, or death. With most of the major public enemies it has been the latter, and usually because of their unwillingness to admit that the Government has the drop. . . . If any citizen finds himself getting perturbed over what may seem to be the FBI's merciless manner in attending to the business at hand, he need but remind himself what little mercy he could face if he himself came face to face with one of Edgar Hoover's listed enemies.

Hoover quickly wrote to praise and thank Carley, who later became a visiting instructor in media relations at the FBI Academy, a "special service contact" for the bureau, and a frequent contributor to the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (FBI 7-2561-713X).

As years passed, the public version of the story became more than a simple defense of the legitimacy of bureau actions, evolving into a statement of the bureau's institutional legitimacy, a demonstration of the bureau's responsibility and utility. For nearly thirty years, the legitimized version of the shooting, often embellished even further, was used as a public relations tool to demonstrate the single-mindedness and determination of the bureau's war on crime and the depravity of criminals like the Dicksons. The story appeared in FBI radio scripts, interesting case memoranda (press releases), and at least twice in bureau-authorized books. With the FBI's assistance in 1943, Frederick L. Collins published *The FBI in Peace and War* (1943), which included a chapter on the Dickson case primarily focused on the bank robber's "gun moll" Stella Mae Dickson but also including a retelling of the shooting. Collins's version largely adhered to the bureau account, except that Dickson only "went for" his guns before being shot (Collins 1943, 58). Collins's book provided the title for a popular radio program that aired on CBS from 1944 to 1958. In *FBI Man: A Personal History*, written with bureau authorization and assistance and published in 1966, one of the agents on the scene, Louis B. Cochran, recounted the shooting in all the bureau's heroic detail. In a scene reminiscent of what was described in Hoover's letter to Owens, Cochran reported that the dying Dickson went for his guns. After the shooting, according to Cochran, "he lay on his back, his eyes closed tight, his hands on his weapons, one leg cramped under him, his hand by his side . . . there had been no blood, no pain. Only that quick lasting peace that comes as a swift falling into a deep, deep sleep" (Cochran 1966, 187-88). According to FBI reports at the time of the shooting, Dickson's guns were found by medical personnel as he was taken by ambulance to the hospital. Both guns were found in the waistband of his pants, under his coat, not in his hands (St. Louis City Coroner 1939, 5).

Conclusions

The Dickson shooting is a single case, but it alludes to the broad power of government organizations to shape public culture through public relations. Because of the scope of their jurisdiction and central place in society, certain government organizations like the FBI gain iconic status, further enhancing their power to shape meaning in society. Public relations becomes a powerful tool for such organizations. Relationships with key opinion shapers, in particular with members of the news media, provide government agencies with an "objective" defense against criticism.

Bureau documents suggest that the shooting of Ben Dickson was anything but a heroic moment for the FBI. Having paid an informant $5,000 to call them when the accused bank robber arrived in St. Louis, the agents on the scene were caught unprepared when Dickson suddenly emerged from the hamburger shop they were watching. One agent shot Dickson in the side and back as he attempted to run away. FBI officials worked to alter circumstances so that the public version of events more closely matched the heroic, responsible, and measured metanarrative the bureau preferred. In so doing, they employed every tactical tool in their public relations arsenal, including falsification of facts, outright lying, and even threats and intimidation.

Dickson was shot, according to FBI officials, only after he refused to give up, crouched, and threatened the agents on the scene. Such extensive information management was prompted by concern about challenges to the bureau's actional and organizational legitimacy. As a federal law enforcement agency with extensive legal jurisdiction, the FBI's existence posed a challenge to one of the basic premises of American society: that of limited executive power. As a central cultural presence led by America's "top cop," Hoover, the bureau operated with little significant Department of Justice or congressional oversight. Because of its iconic status, the FBI represented a potential target for critics who objected to the bureau's activities and moreover objected to the existence of an American secret police force. Faced with a significant challenge to the actional legitimacy of the Dickson shooting, bureau officials carefully managed the aftermath to shape the incident's unpleasant and unruly details into a heroic story demonstrating the utility and responsibility of the FBI. Officials at the highest level of the FBI's Washington bureaucracy orchestrated the creation of a version of events that denied a paid informant led agents to Dickson, claimed Dickson threatened the agents on the scene, and asserted (almost laughably) that it was impossible to say which agent fired the fatal shots. Having concocted an explanation for Dickson's death that demonstrated the FBI's legitimacy, agents pressured the lone civilian witness to the shooting, the only person who could contradict the heroic version of events, to be silent by threatening to charge her with a crime. Even then, bureau officials felt it

wise to feed false information about Dickson's criminal past to St. Louis Police Department officers who testified at the coroner's inquest.

The manipulation of information had its desired effect. Most news reports lauded the agents' work and the St. Louis County Coroner ruled the shooting justified. Once bureau officials had established the actional legitimacy of the incident, the FBI's public relations division was free to utilize the public version of the Dickson shooting as an exemplar of the bureau's institutional legitimacy. Rather than an incident that demonstrated the recklessness of the agents and confirmed the public's worst fears about federal law enforcement, the incident became a foundational tale of the FBI's utility and responsibility. The manipulation of the Dickson shooting demonstrates that bureau officials took the maintenance of the agency's public image very seriously. More important, the transformation of the Dickson shooting from a challenge to actional legitimacy to an exemplar of institutional legitimacy demonstrates the stunning power of a federal law enforcement agency to control its public image through manipulation of events and the effective use of public relations techniques.

Notes

1. On April 8, 1939, in Kansas City, Stella Mae Dickson confessed that she and her late husband robbed the two South Dakota banks (FBI 29-100-651, 12-27).

2. Copies of all FBI files cited herein are in the possession of the author. Originals are in the files of the FBI, Washington, D.C.

3. See, for example, Powers, *Secrecy and Power* (1987), and Theoharis and Cox, *The Boss* (1988).

4. J. Edgar Hoover, handwritten note on Tamm, Memorandum for the Director, 7-2561-618X.

References

Boyd, Josh. 2000. Actional legitimation: No crisis necessary. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 12 (4): 341-53.

Cochran, Louis B. 1966. *FBI man: A personal history.* New York: Duell, Sloane and Pearce.

Collins, Frederick L. 1943. *The FBI in peace and war.* New York: G. P. Putnam.

Epstein, Edwin M. 1972. The historical enigma of corporate legitimacy. *California Law Review* 60:1701-17.

FBI 7-2561. September 20, 1948. Interesting case memorandum.

FBI 7-2561-5. November 29, 1938. J. Edgar Hoover to the communications section (telegram).

FBI 7-2561-604. April 6, 1939. Edward A. Tamm, Memorandum for the director.

FBI 7-2561-604X. April 7, 1939. Gerald B. Norris to J. Edgar Hoover.

FBI 7-2561-616. April 8, 1939. Gerald B. Norris to J. Edgar Hoover. Investigative summary.

FBI 7-2561-618X. April 7, 1939. Edward A. Tamm. Memorandum for the director.

FBI 7-2561-619. April 8, 1939. Edward A. Tamm. Memorandum for the director.

FBI 7-2561-713X. April 19, 1939. J. Edgar Hoover to Jack Carley.

FBI 7-2561-729. April 8, 1939. Edward A. Tamm. Memorandum for the director.

FBI 7-2561-735X. April 11, 1939. Gerald B. Norris. Personal and confidential letter to J. Edgar Hoover.
FBI 7-2561-766X. April 14, 1939. J. Edgar Hoover to John W. Owens.
FBI 7-2561-897. September 20, 1948. Interesting case memorandum.
FBI 29-100-651. April 22, 1939. E. P. Guinane to J. Edgar Hoover. Investigative summary.
Francesconi, R. A. 1982. James Hunt, the Wilmington 10, and institutional legitimacy. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68:47-59.
Lewis, Eugene. 1980. *Public entrepreneurship: Toward a theory of bureaucratic political power.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Powers, Richard Gid. 1987. *Secrecy and power: The life of J. Edgar Hoover.* New York: Free Press.
St. Louis City Coroner. 1939, April 8. Inquest into the death of Benjamin Lee [*sic*] Dickson.
Stillman, P. G. 1974. The concept of legitimacy. *Polity* 7:32-56.
Theoharis, Athan, ed. 1994. *The FBI: An annotated bibliography and research guide*. New York: Garland.
———. 1999. *The FBI: A comprehensive reference guide*. New York: Oryx.
Theoharis, Athan, and John Stuart Cox. 1988. *The boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the great American inquisition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Turkel, Gerald. 1982. The 1980 Chrysler loan guarantee. *Research in Law, Deviance and Social Control* 4:165-89.

Matthew Cecil is an assistant professor in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma.