Journal Entry #2

For this journal entry I chose to review the movie Public Enemies, viewed on 3/5/14. The movie depicts a fictionalized account of the famous John Dillinger, a notorious bank robber during the Great Depression era. The time period this movie depicts takes place in 1933, accounting for numerous prison escapes by John Dillinger and his gang, as well as his bank robberies and a noted love interest. The whole course of the movie has Bureau of Investigations agent Melvin Purvis hot on his trail at the direction of J. Edgar Hoover (this was a precursor to the current FBI and also dives into its expansion within federal law) and ends with a public shootout and the death of John Dillinger, after all of his friends have already been killed.

I choose to review this movie in particular because of the discussions we’ve had about government as a mythmaker. J. Edgar Hoover and Melvin Purvis both repeatedly refer to Dillinger as “a dangerous man” both to their men as well as public announcements and is the main focus of who they want to take down above all others. The Bureau of Investigations even portrays Dillinger as “Public Enemy Number One”. In this portrayal of Dillinger, there is actually not much support for these statements. Dillinger is portrayed as the most rational and least vicious of his gang, and in fact only fires and kills when he has to. During his bank robberies, he never takes money from civilians, only from the bank itself. He also never harms civilians, only police that have shown up and fired on them.

This seems to coincide with the discussions we’ve had in class about government being a mythmaker and crime panics. In this case, J. Edgar Hoover is portrayed as having the forefront in the hunt for John Dillinger in order to further his own agenda of expanding the Bureau of Investigation, so he creates a portrayal that makes Dillinger and others pure evil and they are the only ones who can stop them because they commit crimes over state lines. The term “War on Crime” is used word for word in this movie at one point, which is something in our discussions we were told to beware of. This crime panic was created by the actions of others, and while Dillinger was breaking the law, he was portrayed as doing so in a completely different manner than what was actually the case. Purvis feeds this to the men he is working over and the media by agreeing blindly with Hoover instead of seeing that Dillinger was not a violent man by nature even though he sometimes worked with men like this.