

Off Hoover's Chest

There is no more prestigious career official in the vast apparatus of the U.S. Government than J. Edgar Hoover, 69, for 40 years director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—and none better versed in the art of public relations. It is an art that Hoover and the FBI have practiced through impressive deeds and chary, discreet.

Last week, however, he was smacked by criticism of the FBI—criticism it sparked by the Warren commission report on President Kennedy's assassination and civil-rights workers' allegations that the FBI is unsympathetic to their cause—J. Edgar Hoover spoke out in extraordinary fashion. He chose what for him was a most unusual forum, a three-hour press conference for eighteen women reporters assembled in his office in the U.S. Department of Justice.

His remarks, partly from his own notes and partly in response to questions over coffee cups, touched off a furor of protest. Some of them startled the women into asking whether he was really speaking on the record; Hoover assured them he was. Indeed, some were startled by getting the session at all; it resulted

from persistent pursuit of the Director by Washington news-woman Sarah McClendon in behalf of the group.

One of the ladies' shorthand excerpts:

CIVIL RIGHTS

"I have been one of these states' righters all my life. Naturally, I get more and more irritated when I see Congress passing along to us matters which should be handled at the state level. When you weaken the state authorities, you do a great disservice to law enforcement all over the country. We have had difficulty in Mississippi during the last few years; it was due to the rather harsh approach to the Mississippi situation by the authorities here in Washington, by the Department of Justice. Shortly after President Johnson came in, he asked me to go to Mississippi [to try and] get on speaking terms with the government. I saw Gov. Paul Johnson ... I said, 'I am not here to argue the merits of segregation. I am here to put an end to violence.' I can't speak in too high terms of his Gov. Johnson's maturity. He backed up the FBI. He's doing an excellent job as governor of Mississippi ...

[But] in the southern part of the State, in the swamp country, the only beasts seem to be rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and redneck sheriffs ... The claim is always made that there

is no use to report any violations of civil rights to the FBI in the South because all of our agents in Southern offices were born there and are not sympathetic ... I remember the notorious Martin Luther King making a speech advising the Negroes not to report any violations to our Albany, Ga., agents because they were all Southerners ... We checked. There are five agents at Albany. Four of the five were born in New York, Massachusetts, or Maine, and just one was born in the South ... I asked [for an appointment] with Dr. King, but he would not make the appointment, so I have characterized him in conferences with various Negro groups] as the most notorious liar in the country. That is on the record ... The bureau is not a police agency we don't guard anybody. We are fact finders ... We simply can't wet nurse everybody who goes down to try to reform or re-educate the Negro population of the South.

CRIME AND LAWLESSNESS

... I am in violent disagreement with the bleeding hearts of this country who want to raise the figure of juvenile delinquency to 21 years. In some states it is 18. I believe it should be put down to 16, and that any person who commits a serious crime (I mean a major felony) should be tried as an adult in an adult court and sentenced as such.

There must be a realization on the part of adults of their responsibility. Some of our cities are nests of crime ... I'm a great one for walking, but I have stopped walking back from dinner in New York ...

THE WARREN REPORT

Toward the end of the press conference, Hoover was asked what he thought of the Warren commission report on the assassination of President Kennedy, and its criticisms of the FBI.

"President Johnson, upon his return from Dallas, asked me to take over the investigation," Hoover said, "which I did. My only comment about that report is that it isn't a fair report as far as the FBI is concerned. It is beyond doubt the most classic example of Monday-morning quarterbacking I have ever read. I think it was a great mistake to release a report without the testimony of the witnesses who appeared before the commission ...

Inevitably, Hoover's scattershot blasts made headlines across the nation. They also produced some reaction, most of it low-key. In the Bahamas, where he was vacationing and working on his Nobel Prize acceptance speech to be

delivered in Oslo next month, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. denied he had made the statements Hoover attributed to him, and added quietly: "I cannot conceive of Mr. Hoover making a statement like this without being under extreme pressure. He has apparently faltered under the awesome burdens, complexities, and responsibilities of his office. Therefore, I cannot engage in a public debate with him. I have nothing but sympathy for this man who has served his country so well."

The puzzlement over Hoover's decision to speak out when he did persisted. An FBI aide offered the explanation that Hoover "had a few things on his mind for quite some time," and had thought this would be "as good a time as any to talk about them."

Was the venerable FBI boss actually thinking that he might be ready to retire? He reaches the mandatory retirement age of 70 next Jan. 1, but President Johnson has already signed an order waiving the statute for Hoover; and Hoover himself, during his press conference, said: "It [the Presidential order] is indefinite. I'm stuck."

He could, of course, become unstuck anytime the President should so decide. The Republican New York Herald Tribune, in an editorial titled "The Strange World of J. Edgar Hoover," said the FBI director had shown "a cavalier recklessness with fact and fancy." The New York Times was more forthright. "Under the circumstances," the Times said in an editorial, "it would be wise to let the mandatory provisions of the Federal re

irement law take effect on Mr. Hoover's 70th birthday." Late in the week, Mr. Johnson met with six top civil-rights leaders, including Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP. Towards the end of the meeting, the rights leaders expressed concern over and disagreement with Hoover's remarks about Dr. King. President Johnson listened in thoughtful silence.