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The Late Mr. Hoover, Once Revered, Now Seems Sinister

Polishing Up the F.B.I.'s Reputation

By NICHOLAS M. HORROCK

WASHINGTON—In some far off past before Vietnam, the civil rights movement and the new left, a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was one of America's folk heroes. He was tough, incorruptible, well-trained, well-educated and well-dressed.

He defended his country, as the old radio show used to say, "in peace and war."

This plaster statue began to shatter somewhere between Philadelphia, Miss., and Media, Pa. Last week James Adams, a polished and articulate special agent who is now Assistant Deputy Director of the F.B.I., had the unpleasant task of answering for three decades of secret sins performed by the bureau in the name of national security.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has amassed a comprehensive portfolio of the bureau's domestic intelligence operations. It has confirmed that there were burglaries, forged letters, veiled extortion, blackmail, unauthorized electronic surveillance and attempts to spark violence among black militants.

The centerpiece of its findings on the bureau was a six-year effort to discredit and dishonor Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that included sending him a tape recording of allegedly unsavory incidents in his life made through unauthorized telephone taps and eavesdropping devices. Mr. Adams acknowledged that this vendetta was both illegal and unjustified.

Clarence M. Kelley, the present director of the F.B.I., has said that he has put a stop to many of the practices that have caused the bureau ill repute. Some were ended even before he took over in 1973.

For instance, the counter-intelligence program known as "cointel" under which the bureau set out to disrupt groups it found threatening or unsavory

was largely illegal, and Mr. Kelley said the practices were halted in 1971. Members of the Senate committee staff said, however, they found that some forms of harassment were used after 1971 under the name "intensive investigation."

There are gray areas here. Though it is clearly illegal to send a forged letter to frighten someone, is it illegal to interview his employer about his political affiliations?

Some victims of the old cointel, the Socialist Workers Party, for instance, believe that the bureau uses salacious questions placed to family members, repeated telephone calls and heavy surveillance to harass its targets rather than to gain information for use in possible prosecutions.

Attorney General Edward H. Levi has tightened up on the wiretapping and bugging. He has chosen to authorize electronic surveillance on the narrow ground of recent court orders while both he and Congress try to devise new laws on the subject.

A lot of what is now labeled wrong about the bureau's methods was an outgrowth of the personality and attitude of J. Edgar Hoover. To many in the United States Mr. Hoover was the symbol of law and order for nearly five decades, a cold, uncompromising foe of criminals and subversives.

But in the last five years a more sinister picture has emerged. It was Mr. Hoover who urged his agents to discredit Dr. King and who authorized the tricks and turns of cointel.

He wielded awesome power over his agents from an office lined with private files that contained personal secrets about Presidents, Congressmen and a host of other officials. No man during Mr. Hoover's lifetime ever challenged his control of the F.B.I. and survived the experience unscathed.

The bureau did not set out on its own to break the law. In 1940, President Roosevelt swept civil liberties aside and ordered the F.B.I. into heavy use of electronic surveillance against enemy agents.

Over the next thirty years other Presidents pressed the Bureau to counter what they saw as threats from the Communist party, the Klu Klux Klan, the radical antiwar movement and the in roads of the Soviet intelligence service.

Presidents and Attorneys-General used Mr. Hoover and in turn he quietly used them. Mr. Hoover sought authorization for almost every Bureau activity, but now there is evidence that he often exceeded his commands. Most Attorneys-General were never entirely aware of what Mr. Hoover was doing.

Mr. Levi is now demanding candor from his F.B.I. director and there is no suggestion that Clarence Kelley is not candid.

Mr. Hoover died in May of 1972, and many of the men who served with him have retired. At the bureau now there is give and take with the press, greater personal freedom for agents and no evidence that such practices as leaking stories about the sexual habits of opponents is tolerated.

Mr. Adams asked the committee last week to give the F.B.I. "guidelines" on how it should meet its responsibility to maintain the domestic security of this country. Several members of the committee and others in the Justice Department said the simplest way would be for the bureau to obey the laws it enforces.

But many in Congress believe that more permanent efforts must be made to assure the nation that abuses won't arise the next time the country faces a crisis.

They plan never to let another man gain 50 years of dominance over the F.B.I. It is also clear that the agency must be willing to face strong Congressional oversight.

Nicholas M. Horrock is a reporter in the Washington bureau of The New York Times who specializes in intelligence matters.