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Hoover and Kennedy

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It is difficult for me to think of a public expression which J. Edgar Hoover has lately emitted that reflected credit upon him except when he sent flowers to Walter Jenkins in the hospital.

It is just as difficult for me in my bigotry to think of anything Robert Kennedy has said in public lately that did not reflect credit upon him. That is why his quarrel with Hoover is so serious a mistake; all quarrels with Hoover are on Hoover's level, which means that he is conducting this one in the tone which he long ago discouraged us from not expecting and that Kennedy has been reduced to the tone he had given us so much reason to expect to be blessed in his case by never hearing again.

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Kennedy has told us that, when he was Attorney General, he was unaware of the extent to which the FBI was bugging the hotel rooms of private citizens. Hoover again insisted that Kennedy had known about this practice all along; yesterday, in fact, he released a memorandum of July 7, 1961, from which there can be drawn the inference that the Attorney General was wondering at the time whether the FBI was sufficiently attuned "to the possibilities of electronic eavesdropping in organized crime investigations."

Now, first of all, the Kennedys would have avoided a great deal of trouble if the President had opened his term by not reappointing J. Edgar Hoover. Mr. Kennedy had splendid reasons, partisan though they may have been. It is one feature of our civilization over the last 20 years that we have robbed as our chief judge of loyalty to the nation a man notably incapable of personal loyalty. When Hoover is in trouble, he will turn in anybody except whoever happens to be President at the moment. Former Presidents are no exception; in 1953, Hoover testified to the House Un-American Activities Committee Harry Truman had promoted a government employe even after he "knew" from FBI reports that the man was a Communist agent.

Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, among other Democrats, was reported to have been so incensed by this performance as to say that one

reason he wanted a Democratic President was to get Hoover thrown out. So Kennedy reappointed Hoover and here he comes again, asking us to believe that Robert Kennedy made him do things which the history of the FBI indicates to be the passion of his entire life.

But Hoover's character aside, Robert Kennedy can hardly hope to make us believe that he had nothing to do with the business. What he did at the very least was to authorize a directive giving the FBI the authority to install eavesdropping devices "when required in the interest of internal security or national safety, including organized crime, kidnappings and matters wherein human life might be at stake." He did not, of course, give Hoover the right to tap telephones on a spectrum quite this broad, but that can hardly be offered as an example of restraint since to have done so would have been to authorize what happens to be a felony under federal law.

And so, in pursuit of organized crime, Hoover monitored assignments in the hotel suite of the lobbyist for North American Aviation. The definition of organized crime can be extended to cover most of the population of the United States if you tune in on the conversations of all the people a hoodlum talks to in the course of his day's work and then branch out to tune in all the conversations of the people they talk to.

The Attorney General could not possibly have known the details of this operation, which is precisely why he should not have given Hoover any such power. He knew what Hoover was like. And we may be sure that the annual reports of the Attorney General, while never mentioning the practice, were pleased with the results. No, I'm afraid Attorney General Kennedy has a piece of J. Edgar Hoover and that Sen. Kennedy would be better off if he ceased trying to convince himself he didn't.

These things pass, and anyone who used to be a DA can adjust to civilian life far better if he resists the intrusion of any recollection of his days as a prosecutor: it is, after all, one of the two occupations against which the courts exist to protect the citizen.