



Hoover vs. RFK: Behind the Battle

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The public collision between FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy climaxes a behind-the-scenes battle that began at the outset of the Kennedy era in 1960.

It is a clash with deep political as well as personal overtones, obscured by complicated details of the wire-tapping debate.

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Why Hoover chose to provoke an open conflict at this juncture is an unresolved mystery. The crudest explanation is that, with another extension of his over-age tenure up for review in January, the 71-year-old G-man feared he might finally be deemed expendable after a series of unusual and embarrassing disclosure's about the FBI's eavesdropping operations.

According to this theory nothing could be more calculated to fortify Hoover's White House status than an assault on Kennedy—especially on an issue that might downgrade the dissident Senator in the eyes of civil libertarians.

Amid the conjecture, it is plain that Hoover deliberately invited the conflict. The language of his exchange with Rep. Gross, an Iowa Republican, is so palpably rehearsed that no one in Washington can doubt that the script was conceived by the FBI.

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Hoover learned swiftly after John F. Kennedy's election that life would be different. The young Attorney General was both the brother and intimate adviser of the new President; for the first time in many long years the director of the FBI was reminded that he was a subordinate to the head of the Justice Dept., not the leader of an autonomous empire who dealt as a sovereign with the President.

An early rebuff came when the FBI sent over a "loyalty" dossier on Pierre Salinger, one of JFK's closest associates; it seems that a member of Salinger's family had once been linked with an alleged Communist front. The Kennedys, who knew Salinger well, were unimpressed by such FBI extremism in the practice of vigilance; Salinger kept his job.

There were frictions on civil rights. No Negro had ever been admitted to study at the FBI's national academy; at the urging of Mike Murphy, Attorney General Kennedy insisted in 1962 that a promising New York officer named Lloyd Sealy be permitted to take the course. He did; he is now the highly-respected Assistant Chief Inspector on New York's police force.

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In the realm of civil liberties Kennedy publicly argued that the U. S. Communist Party was disintegrating and that "the problem we have is overseas." Hoover continued to magnify the domestic Communist threat and cement his role as the hero of right-wing fanatics.

One of the sharpest confrontations involved the case of Junius Scales, an admitted former Communist and Smith Act prisoner, whose break was attested to by a long roster of sophisticates, including Norman Thomas and David Dubinsky. Hoover bitterly resisted pleas for parole on the ground that Scales had "refused to cooperate" with the FBI by naming those he had known many years earlier. Kennedy overruled Hoover (as well as the Eastland committee) and ordered Scales freed.

Finally there were recurrent reports in Washington that Hoover's resignation would be graciously accepted after John F. Kennedy's reelection to a second term.

J. Edgar Hoover, so long the capital's leading sacred cow,

began to feel like a paper tiger.

Then came the assassination in Dallas.

"I always recall Bobby describing how quickly Hoover's voice changed as soon as he knew the Attorney General no longer had a brother in the White House," a close friend said afterward.

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These episodes indicate some of the roots of the present struggle. The image of Hoover as a "non-political" man who stands austere above partisan battles is a myth. In 1953, when the then Attorney General, Herbert Brownell, opened fire on Harry Truman's alleged coddling of Communists, Hoover enthusiastically supported Brownell's version. The question arose then, as it does to some degree now, as to why he had not resigned earlier and publicly proclaimed his knowledge; then, as now, he hid behind the claim that he was merely a deputy.

In the current uproar the vulnerability in Kennedy's case is that there is some validity in Hoover's depiction of his secondary role during the Kennedy time. Some issues being drawn now involve distinctions without a difference (as between wire-tapping and "bugging"). Kennedy was undoubtedly more tolerant of such intrusions in the early days of his regime than in later phases, or than he would be now; Hoover may have believed he had considerable authorization to carry on this part of his business as usual. In their own fashion both men may be offering their subjective versions of the truth.

The larger dimensions of the battle go beyond these fragments of remembrance. Hoover in fact remains a voice of political reaction, whose name still commands reverence on the rightist fringe. Kennedy has steadily emerged as an unorthodox liberal challenger to Hoover's verities. In that context the impact of this clash assumes its real and explosive meaning. Hoover's blast may have given the signal for a grotesque right-wing drive to "get" Kennedy for his delinquencies on civil liberties. Logic does not always rule our politics.

Meanwhile, now as for many years, few citizens of any stature in Washington will use their telephones without suspecting that Hoover's agents are listening. But who will get to the bottom of that story during this strange storm?