

THE ADMINISTRATION Off the Chest & into the Fire

John Edgar Hoover, who almost singlehandedly turned a subsidiary department of the U.S. Department of Justice into that internationally famous unit known as the FBI, has long been an enigma within an enigma. His critics have accused him of being a publicity seeker; yet Hoover as a rule will not even pose for a picture unless he has a prepublication look at the story that is to go with it, and in the 40 years that he has headed the Federal Bureau of Investigation, his open-forum press conferences have been as scarce as hens' teeth.

But last week, all of a sudden, Hoover agreed to talk over coffee cups with a group of Washington newswomen at the request of that professional presidential-press-conference pest, Sarah McClendon. The session lasted for 2 1/2 hours, and the enigmatic Mr. Hoover managed, if nothing else, to get a lot of things off his chest.

Most Curious. For one thing, he was smarting under the Warren Commission's criticism that the FBI had failed to inform the Secret Service that Lee Harvey Oswald, whom Hoover's boys had under on-and-off surveillance for months, was a possible threat to the life of President Kennedy. The criticism, said Hoover, was "a classic example of Monday-morning quarterbacking." Since the assassination, Hoover said, the FBI has started turning over to the Secret Service "thousands of names of beatniks and kooks and crackpots." But, he added, he didn't see how all this was going to help the Secret Service, since it was "hopelessly undermanned and ill-equipped to do the job it is supposed to do."

Criticism of the FBI for its failures in the Kennedy case, said Hoover, was "unjust and unfair." That was most curious, since Hoover himself ordered disciplinary action against three FBI agents, including James Hosty Jr., the Dallas agent who had been keeping an eye on Oswald for months, who was suspended for 30 days without pay and transferred to Kansas City.

"All the Same." But in his blasts against the Warren Commission, Hoover was relatively mild. FBI agents in Mississippi, he said, had been rendered all but helpless because the state is "filled with water moccasins, rattlesnakes, and red-neck sheriffs, and they are all in the same category, as far as I am concerned." In even more vitriolic style, the FBI chief attacked the South's most revered integrationist, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who, even as Hoover delivered his blast, was in the Bahamas working on his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, to be delivered in Oslo on Dec. 10.

"I remember," said Hoover to the newsladies, "the notorious Martin Luther King making a speech in the South some months ago where he advised the

Negroes not to report any violations to our Albany, Georgia, agents because they were all Southerners." A check of FBI records, said Hoover, had proved that of five agents in racially torn Albany one was from New York, one from Massachusetts, one from Indiana, one from Minnesota, and one from Georgia. Then Hoover delivered the line that rang round the world. Said he of King: "He is the most notorious liar in the country."

Somewhat awed by the size of their scoop, the newsladies anxiously asked if they could quote Hoover on that. Indeed they could, said the FBI chief. But the next day one of his aides entered some qualifications: "He didn't say everything King said was a lie," said the agent. "Just that specific point on Albany." Exactly when had King said such



HOOVER

the Warren Commission and the Rev. Dr. King, Hoover took the occasion of his kaffeeklatsch with the newswomen to denounce law enforcement in New York City ("New York's Central Park—no one dares walk there even in the daytime, and there are holdups on 5th Avenue at 9:30 or 10 at night"), and inveigh against "bleeding hearts," a term that, to his mind, embraced everyone from local judges who "ought to have more guts when it comes to handing down sentences" against juvenile delinquents, to Supreme Court justices.

"Stuck." Such public outspokenness was most uncharacteristic. Beyond frequent releases about crime and the threats of Communism within the U.S., Hoover has generally limited himself to more mute, though sometimes surprising, expressions of his sentiments. He resented Robert Kennedy's efforts as Attorney General to take a hand in running the FBI, and he has barely spoken to Bobby since President Kennedy's assassination. He sent a bouquet of flow-



KING IN BIMINI

The girls got quite a scoop.

a thing about the FBI in Albany? A Hoover aide produced a quote in a Nov. 20, 1962, clipping from the Chicago Defender, a Negro newspaper.

"Appalled & Surprised." King's fellow civil rights leaders—including Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, James Farmer and A. Philip Randolph—came angrily to his defense during a visit to the White House, got what they later described as noncommittal answers from President Johnson. King himself responded with a telegram to Hoover: "I was appalled and surprised at your reported statement maligning my integrity. What motivated such an irresponsible accusation is a mystery to me. I have sincerely questioned the effectiveness of the FBI in racial incidents, particularly where bombings and brutalities against Negroes are at issue, but I have never attributed this merely to the presence of Southerners in the FBI." In a cutting statement to the press, King said that Hoover's assertion seemed to indicate that the G-man "has apparently faltered under the awesome burdens, complexities and responsibilities of his office."

In addition to his broadsides against

ers to the hospital room of Walter Jenkins even as the FBI was being assigned by President Johnson to investigate the Jenkins case.

J. Edgar's outburst left a lot of people puzzling over what had happened to the tight-lipped old G-man. Some felt that, because he will reach the mandatory retirement age of 70 on Jan. 1, this was simply a parting shot before he turned in his badge. Yet Lyndon Johnson signed an executive order last May that allows Hoover to stay on no matter how old he is. Still, it was obvious that Hoover had been chafing for a long time in his unfamiliar role as a Justice Department underling, and his reverberating blast to the newshens was one way to ease that frustration. J. Edgar Hoover has many old foes, has made a legion of new ones recently; undoubtedly there will be vastly increased pressures on the White House from now on to boot the old fellow out of his job.

* Last week Assistant FBI Director William C. Sullivan said that some 200 Communists were among the 200,000 civil rights demonstrators who participated in last year's March on Washington.