

J. EDGAR HOOVER—MAN AND LEGEND

By ANTHONY LEWIS

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is a hero to millions of decent citizens and anathema to evil men. No other American now or in our past has ever served the cause of justice more faithfully or so well. No other American has fought so long or so hard for a safer and better national life."

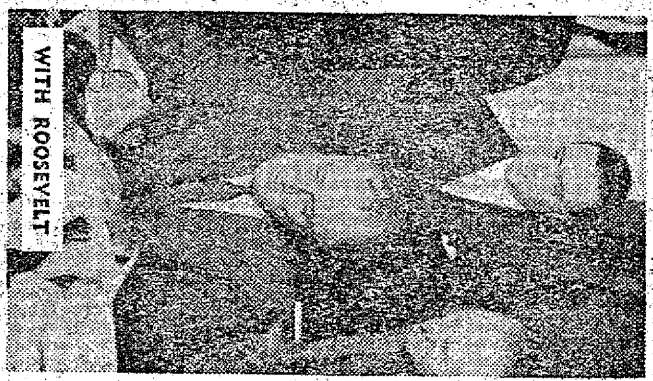
The subject of that accolade was J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The author was President Johnson. The occasion was a White House ceremony last May celebrating Mr. Hoover's 40th anniversary as F.B.I. chief and waiving his compulsory retirement at 70.

The extraordinary position of J. Edgar Hoover in American public life was really summed up in that affair. Presidents pay him homage. While others rise and fall in public and official esteem, he goes serenely on, seemingly immune to the ordinary vicissitudes of high office. For him, many rules are waived.

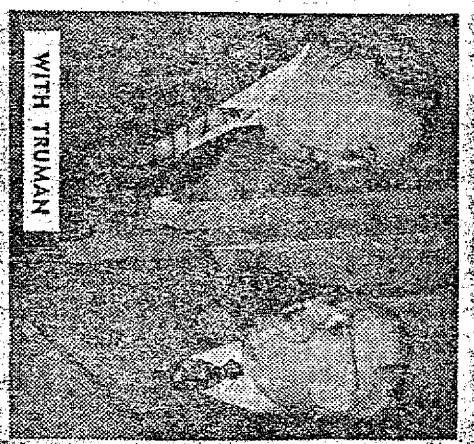
Portents

Against that background, any sign of shakiness in Mr. Hoover's position—however slight—would be noteworthy. And now, unexpectedly, there are such signs.

Mr. Hoover's statement at a news conference two weeks ago that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was "the most notable



WITH ROOSEVELT



WITH TRUMAN



WITH EISENHOWER



WITH KENNEDY



WITH EISENHOWER

J. Edgar Hoover, who was first appointed director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation during the Coolidge Administration in 1924, has served under eight Presidents. These pictures show him with the last five.

Associated Press. The New York Times United Press International

ous bar in a country" brought widespread criticism. A number of ordinarily admiring news-papers expressed shock, and some called for his retirement. This week Newsweek magazine reported that President Johnson had decided he "must find a new chief of the F.B.I.," and stuck to its story in the face of a White House denial.

The question is whether this buzz of talk signifies any real change in Mr. Hoover's status. To attempt an answer to that question one must consider why he has been so relatively immune to attack in the past and whether those reasons are now fading.

The first reason for Mr. Hoover's heretofore inviolate position is his ability. He has put together the most expert and enlightened police investigative force in this country.

There has never been a hint of corruption in the F.B.I.—a statement that can be made of virtually no other large police force in this country. Mr. Hoover has kept it free of partisan politics. And it is hard to remember any incident of an F.B.I. agent abusing his office.

Mr. Hoover's own views are plainly well over on the conservative side. In a characteristic speech he will applaud patriotism and religion and deplore immorality, the relativistic ideas taught to youth these days, and softness toward Communism. Yet he has worked happily, indeed intimately, with Presidents as liberal-oriented as Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

Mr. Hoover has assiduously stayed on the good side of Congress as well. His ability to cul-

ivate key members is legendary. As good a sample as any was that White House ceremony last May. Present—and greeted by Mr. Hoover as "some of my very best friends"—were the Speaker of the House, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and of the subcommittee that handles F.B.I. funds, the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and the Senate minority leader.

While public attacks on Mr. Hoover have been a rarity over the years, private criticism in informed circles has not been lacking.

One complaint is that he is too jealous of his own position, that he is surrounded by yes men at the top of the F.B.I., that he devotes too much attention to self-glorifying publications. Connected with this is the criticism that he likes to concentrate on relatively easy aspects of police work rather than those that are less likely to make F.B.I. records shine.

Thus it is said that Mr. Hoover emphasizes car thefts and bank robberies because the statistics are good on solutions of these crimes. But for a long time he is said to have resisted bringing the F.B.I. fully into the much more difficult problems of organized crime and civil rights.

As Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy did persuade Mr. Hoover to take a much more

active interest in organized crime and to expand the F.B.I.'s intelligence work among the Ku Klux Klan and other anti-Negro groups. President Johnson encouraged Mr. Hoover to open a large new F.B.I. office in Mississippi this year—a step that has had highly productive results.

Adverse Comments. Mr. Hoover's very independent success as attorney general has been seen as dangerous. Successive attorneys general have found that they have little or no control over him; he often refuses, as a minor example, to conform his speeches to official Government policy.

The critics say that it is difficult to have a police director—especially one with as much administrative information on individuals as he has accumulated—so beyond the control of the law enforcement authorities for whom he theoretically works.

Some of these longstanding complaints—in private doubtless—underlie the current public criticism of Mr. Hoover. His attack on Dr. King, for one, served to reinforce existing distrust of the F.B.I. among civil rights groups. They accused the bureau of standing by while Negroes were brutally assaulted in the South.

Those charges ironically won Mr. Hoover sympathy among informed persons. The fact is that the F.B.I. has no power under existing law to act as a general police force in the

South. And the paucity of successful civil rights prosecutions of the bureau but of local grand juries that will not indict and trial juries that will not convict.

Yesterday's news in effect provided a dramatic answer to the charges of F. B. I. laxity on civil rights. Mr. Hoover's men arrested 21 persons in connection with the murder of three Phila. Miss. last summer. Those close to that situation say the bureau worked doggedly to develop the necessary evidence. Even the stipulated tend to agree that the F. B. I. has performed superbly in Mississippi since it expanded its activities there at President Johnson's urging.

The general feeling of the best-informed persons in Washington is that Mr. Hoover's position remains basically strong. He is as practiced as ever in the direct service of Presidents. He has no less information, his grown appreciably less numerous or influential.

Sense of Balance. Such difficulty as he is in many observers' feel, is Mr. Hoover's own doing. They argue that in attacking Dr. King he abandoned his usual care in public relations and allowed himself the luxury of replying with full vigor to what he considered provocative attacks.

In this view, the King's attack suggests the one possible change of significance in the circumstances that have made Mr. Hoover inviolate for so long. That would be a change in Mr. Hoover himself.

He will be 70 years old on Jan. 1. Some critics say that his ego has grown with age and that he is losing his sense of balance. They note that a week after his news conference assault on Dr. King, and despite adverse press reaction to the conference, he made a speech attacking—in apparent reference to civil rights organizations—"zealots or pressure groups, spearheaded at times by Communists and moral degenerates," that "have no compunction in carping, lying and exaggerating."

But the truth is that there is no real public sign of age or any other factor seriously weakening his hold on office. He chuckled when he was asked in an interview this week whether he had any intention of retiring soon.

Thus the best bet is that J. Edgar Hoover will ride out this storm, too. His relations with Lyndon Johnson are as close as they have been with any President—they were neighbors for 19 years. Unless circumstances—meaning primarily Mr. Hoover himself—show signs of shattering, the President is unlikely to take on the job of replacing a legend.