

Kelley Says FBI Is 'Truly Sorry' For Past Abuses

Publicly Puts Blame On Hoover

5/9/76
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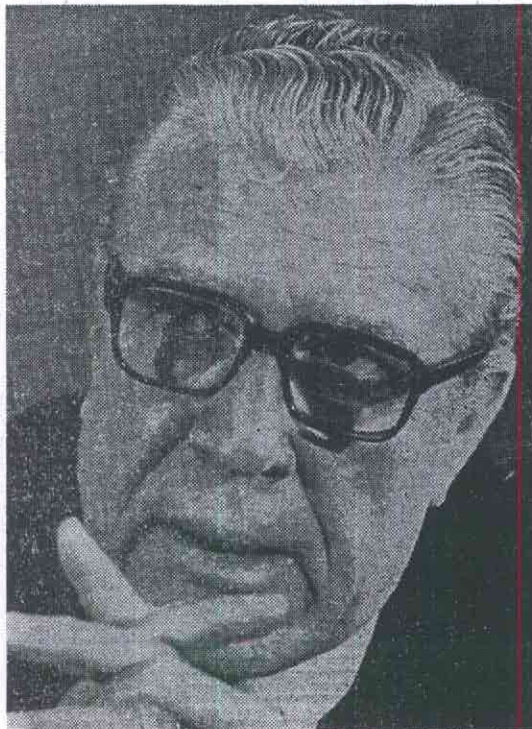
FBI Director Clarence M. Kelley said yesterday that the bureau is "truly sorry" for past abuses of its power and, for the first time, publicly placed the blame for FBI wrongdoing on the late J. Edgar Hoover.

"Today, the superhuman image of the FBI, and the power and glory that accompanied it, has greatly diminished," Kelley said. "Amid the thunder and lightning of criticism, the FBI has descended from Mount Olympus. And, as it turns out, we are mere mortals, with human imperfections, and we always have been.

"The abuses assailed occurred chiefly during the twilight of Mr. Hoover's administration," Kelley said. And, in a pointed reference to Hoover's 48 years as head of the bureau, he added:

"I believe no man should again serve as director for more than 10 years. No director of the FBI should abide incursions upon the liberties of the people."

FBI sources said Kelley's



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remarks—contained in a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Mo.—were intended to signal a new direction in the bureau's response to charges of runaway police power.

Westminster was the site of Winston Churchill's famous statement on March 5, 1946, that "an Iron Curtain has descended across the continent of Europe," which focused attention on the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Cold War.

The charges stem chiefly from disclosures that the FBI, between 1956 and 1971, engaged in a series of counterintelligence programs (Cointelpro) aimed at disrupting militant political groups such as the Communist Party, the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Panthers.

Cointelpro involved widespread use of illegal tactics such as fabricating derogatory

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tory information about target individuals and sending it to their families and employers.

These activities were ordered by Hoover, who died in May, 1972. Until now, however, Kelley, the director since 1973, had deliberately shied away from public discussion of his predecessor's responsibility for the wrongdoing.

He took this tack, it is known, out of concern for morale within the bureau. Many older agents retain strong loyalties to Hoover's memory and regard suggestions that the FBI should apologize for Cointelpro as adverse reflections on their own careers.

As a result, past public statements by Kelley and other FBI executives conceded that some abuses had existed, but argued that they were at least partly justified by national security considerations. They also urged the public to judge the FBI by its future performance rather than the past.

These same elements were present in Kelley's speech yesterday. For the first time, though, he subordinated them to an admission, more frank and unequivocal than he had made before, that the FBI had amassed too much power under Hoover and had then abused this power.

Some sources said that the speech reflected a decision that the bureau, if it is to regain public confidence, must stop its efforts to justify the past and protect Hoover's reputation. One source characterized the speech as "a first, tentative step toward the de-Hooverization of the FBI."

In his remarks, Kelley was careful to say that "we should not utterly disregard Mr. Hoover's unparalleled contributions to peace-keeping in the United States." In fact, he noted that the FBI won its power because of its great success, under Hoover's direction in the 1930s and 1940s, in apprehending "public enemy" gangsters and espionage agents.

"And so the image of the FBI grew taller and taller,"

Kelley said. "With such enormous public esteem and prestige, of course, came power and influence... and abuses of that power occurred."

"Some of these activities were clearly wrong and quite indefensible. We most certainly must never allow them to be repeated... The mistakes must be acknowledged if they are to be avoided in the future. We cannot pretend there were no missteps if we are to progress.

"We are truly sorry we were responsible for instances which now are subject to such criticism," Kelley said. "I could provide some reasons why we took certain actions, but more important than giving explanations is the fact we need to make it clearly understood that we recognize errors and have learned from them. In mitigation, I truly believe the mistakes to have been errors of the mind and not of the heart."

Turning to the future, Kelley argued that the FBI still has an important role to play in safeguarding the country from subversion and terrorism.

"The FBI could retire a bit from the battlefield, abdicate some of its investigative powers, and thereby escape the barbs of its critics," he said. "But certainly neither the American people nor the cause of civil liberty would derive benefit from that."

Instead, he added, "I'm sure that cooperative use of the FBI's powers, through interaction with all the peace-keeping agencies, all the institutions of government and our society, cannot only benefit the people, but is essential to their well-being."

Kelley also said, "The FBI will never again occupy a unique position that permitted improper activity without accountability."

Without mentioning Hoover by name, he drew a pointed comparison between himself and the image cultivated by his predecessor.

"I can assure you that Clarence M. Kelley does not aspire to ascend Mount Olympus and sit upon any divine throne," he said.