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IN FOCUS Webster's First 6 Months at

FBI

"Frank Johnson is the smartest judge in the country," the agent said, referring to the Alabama justice who first agreed to become director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation but later declined, citing poor health.

"The reason he's so smart is that he thought it over and decided not to take the goddamned job," he continued. "And now old Frank is down there fishing in Mobile Bay and Bill Webster is trying to deal with all these turkeys Hoover left behind him at headquarters and is getting beaten up by everyone in the Congress and the press because of things we did to (Martin Luther) King 15 years ago."

Tries to move bureau further out of Hoover's shadow

By Anthony Marro

Special to The Washington Star

It has been just over six months since William H. Webster arrived to take charge of the bureau and its 8,000 special agents, and there have been, to be sure, moments when he must have wondered why he ever left St. Louis and the comfortable life of a federal judge.

He hasn't actually been beaten up on by the Congress, but he has been accused - unjustly, he feels - of lying

to a congressional committee about the FBI's plans for a computerized "message switching" system, and has been rebuffed to date in his attempts to get a law passed granting his agents immunity from civil suits.

He hasn't himself been the subject of serious criticism in the press, but he has spent more time than he has cared to answering questions about things that the bureau did in the past, not only to King, but to others whose chief offenses were that they held political views contrary to those of J. Edgar Hoover.

HE REFUSES to agree that he inherited a group of "turkeys" from the Hoover years, but he has, by several accounts, occasionally erupted in anger at poor staff work by members of his executive council, the top administrative group in the bureau, and told them that he wasn't interested in the sort of self-serving rhetoric they fed his to predecessors.

"He's very impressive in staff meetings," says one agent who has sat in on a number of them. "He's got

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a quick mind and he doesn't have any tolerance for the sort of bull— that people around here are used to handing out. He cuts people short when they try to waltz around him with rhetoric instead of answering questions."

For the record, Webster professes to be happy in his job, satisfied with the management structure he inherited and confident that the agency is responsive to the direction he is giving it.

"I'm thoroughly challenged by what I'm doing here," he said in an interview. "I've been holding back the word 'enjoy,' but I do enjoy it. . . . You can't not enjoy it with the kind of people you work with around here. It's just a first-rate group of men and women."

But it also is clear that he has been moving cautiously during his first six months, trying to win the confidence

of both his agents and the public, keeping a low profile (so low that when he arrived to take part in a recent "pro-celebrity" tennis tournament one tournament official didn't recognize the name) and yet attempting to move the bureau further out of the shadow of Hoover without appearing critical of Hoover himself.

"I think each director ought to be remembered in terms of the times in which he lived and how he responded to the times," he once told a reporter. "I always think of Mr. Hoover as a great builder. He built this organization into one of the most effective law enforcement agencies in the world, and that reflected certain talents: discipline, determination, steadfastness."

THE AGENCY BUILT by Hoover also reflected his prejudices against women, blacks and other minorities. A recent report by the General Accounting Office makes clear that even now, 15 years after then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy told Hoover to recruit some black agents, the FBI continues to have one of the worst records in the federal bureaucracy in terms of recruitment of minorities and women, and this is one thing that Webster has said repeatedly he intends to change.

It also had a reputation for squandering its resources on the sort of activities — minor bank robberies, stolen cars, and the like — that made for impressive-sounding statistics at appropriations hearings, but which did little to come to grips with organized and white-collar crime. Webster's predecessor, Clarence M. Kelley, had some success in his efforts to turn the FBI away from minor crimes and into "quality" cases, and Webster said he intends to keep moving the bureau in this direction.

Many bureaucracies are hostile to outsiders and resistant to change, however, and the FBI is more hostile and resistant than most. When he left after a brief, unhappy tenure as acting director, several aides to L. Patrick Gray III warned his successor that he was walking into a "snake pit." And even after he had been running the bureau for nearly four years, Kelley, himself a former agent, complained in private that every time he suggested a change he got "40 reasons why we can't do it" and no reasons why they could.

Webster hasn't been in charge long enough to claim credit for measurable changes, but he says he has set the bureau in the direction he wants it, and thinks that the sort of resistance to change that Kelley encountered is pretty much a thing of the past.

"I can't say that everyone snaps to (immediately) — these people are strong people here, they speak their mind," he said recently. "But the

significant thing is that when the decision is made they get behind it, and they want to make it work. And I've found nothing but evidence of support."

This last may be something of an overstatement, because there have been several decisions that have stirred considerable controversy within the bureau, and which large numbers of agents and officials still sputter about. One of them was the decision to promote James B.

between headquarters and the field. And by putting him in charge of New York, he said, he's throwing his support to Adams, who had spent most of his career at headquarters in various administrative jobs, to the No. 2 spot in the bureau.

THERE ARE MANY headquarters officials who applauded this decision, arguing that Adams is probably the brightest person in the bureau hierarchy, is respected by powerful congressional figures and is an articulate defender of the FBI.

But it was not until a sharply critical article appeared in Time magazine (one unnamed agent was quoted as saying that he couldn't comment on the appointment because he was too busy throwing up) that Webster, by several accounts, realized the extent of anti-Adams sentiment out in the field, where many older agents consider him a sort of "apparatchik" who was a part of the harassments and severe, irrational disciplines of the Hoover years.

"I think that really opened his eyes," one of them said. "It didn't change his mind about Jim; he still thinks he's the best man for the job. But it made him realize that he wasn't getting any real input from people out in the field."

Webster's next major appointment, whether intentional or not, was a signal that he wasn't paying attention only to officials in Washington. In picking Neil J. Welch, the SAC (for Special Agent in Charge) in Philadelphia, to take over the New York office, the bureau's largest, he selected a man not only widely respected by agents, but one who had feuded openly with headquarters in the past, and who had once said that the FBI would be better off if someone put sandbags around the J. Edgar Hoover Building and disconnected the telephones.

This time, it was officials at headquarters who were said to be angry, but Webster went ahead with the appointment, figuring he could advance toward two goals in a single move.

By bringing Welch onto the executive council, he said in an interview, he hopes to bridge some of the gaps port behind a man who has spent much of his career working the sort of long, complicated cases against organized and white-collar crime that he and Attorney General Griffin Bell have made their priorities for the future.

"NEW YORK IS a sort of . . . training ground for many, many people, and how they are trained in New York may have a lot to do with how they perform during the rest of their careers," he said. "And I thought it was important to get an agent there . . . (who has the ability to) re-program an office, get into quality work and inspire his men to want to be in that work."

Webster himself has moved to cut down on some of the petty crimes that still occupy the time of his agents by telling Congress that he'd just as soon transfer to other agencies responsibility for enforcing laws against illegal wearing of a Civil Defense insignia, interstate transport of unsafe refrigerators, improper use of "Smokey The Bear" symbols, and unauthorized use of railroad passes, and the like.

And he has moved more dramatically to alter the composition of the agent force by insisting repeatedly, and strongly, that greater efforts be made to recruit women, blacks and other minorities. Since he arrived, the number of women has increased by nearly 50 percent (from 91 to 140) and the number of blacks has increased from 143 to 172.

Webster doesn't try to claim credit for all of the increases, but does go to considerable lengths to try to convince outsiders that he means it when he says that he wants a serious effort made to recruit minorities and women.

"The major institutional difficulty that we have to face is the fact of life that (we can only employ) 285 or 286 new people this year," he says. "So when you start off with only 143 blacks and 150 Hispanics out of 8,000 agents, you can see that . . . if I just

hired nothing but blacks or Hispanics, or a combination of both, that isn't going to really change the figures.

"But I think we can change the direction, and we are doing that. . . . On Aug. 14, 39 new agents went into the new class (at the FBI Academy at Quantico). Of that, 17 were minorities and nine were women. That's 26 out of 39."

The 55-year-old Webster, who came East to attend college at Amherst and then returned to St. Louis to a career as a Republican-appointed prosecutor and judge, has spoken out loudly on several issues that concern his agents, arguing against additional curbs on the use of informants, and for a bill — also backed by Bell, but not likely to pass this year — that would make agents immune from damages in civil suits stemming from their investigative work.

AT TIMES THIS has rankled congressional liberals, who complain privately that he occasionally seems more interested in protecting his agents than in protecting the public. After one such appearance on the Hill, a liberal House Democrat was overheard to mutter to an aide as he stormed down a corridor: "Well, you've got to hand it to them — they found their man."

Webster denies that he is in any way insensitive to civil liberties issues, but argues that it's not fair to his agents to run the risk of being caught up in civil suits because of actions that they believe were legitimate, and ordered by persons with proper authority.

He also argues that, as he told the American Bar Association last month in New York, "The right to be left alone does not include the right to commit crimes and the right not to be detected in the course of committing those crimes."

Jerry Berman, an official in the American Civil Liberties Union's Washington office, believes that it's too early to make any real assessment of Webster. "He's endorsed the

principle that the FBI should not be investigating legitimate First Amendment activity, and that's good," he said. "But the idea that agents should have immunity from civil suits is just unacceptable."

One of the first big issues, Berman believes, will come when Webster has to take a stand on whether the charter now being drafted to cover the bureau's activities should limit the FBI to investigations of "domestic security" matters only when there is cause to believe that a crime has been committed — something the ACLU has urged and the bureau has opposed in the past.

FOR MANY AGENTS, however, an even bigger issue concerns the possible discipline of 68 agents and officials who were involved in, but not indicted for, a series of allegedly illegal break-ins, mail-openings and wiretaps in the early 1970s during a hunt for radical fugitives.

Webster is wrestling with that decision right now, knowing that to not discipline the agents would lead to charges that he is insensitive to civil liberties concerns and that to discipline them would lead to charges that he is willing to sacrifice agents for actions they not only thought were proper, but for which they had been given "merit awards" in the past.

Webster says that he expects criticism on such decisions, but that his real goal is to restore enough public confidence in the agency that people will respect the decisions for what they are, and not look at them with suspicion, in search of deeper or darker motives.

"I expect to be scrutinized and I expect to be watched," he said. "But I hope that the first, instant reaction of somebody won't be to question my motives or wonder what the ulterior motive is. . . ."

"I just want to see people have a comfortable feeling about what the bureau is doing."