

A New Focus on F.B.I.

Talk in Capital No Longer Centers on Hoover but on Bureau as Institution

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 8—How good are your relations with J. Edgar Hoover, a Justice Department official was asked. "No better and no worse than they have ever been," he replied.

Does that mean they are good or bad, the questioner persisted. "No comment," the official said. When a Justice Department official does not say outright that things with the F.B.I. are just great, it is significant. It is a sign of the times and of the problems that have recently come to plague the F.B.I.'s 76-year-old chief.

It is also a sign of Mr. Hoover's bureaucratic skill, power, perseverance and just plain staying-power that officials still don't talk about the real problems between their agencies and the F.B.I.

If they wanted to talk about them publicly, they could mention that the bureau has severed direct liaison with the Central Intelligence Agency. They would also contend that it is plagued with bureaucratic rigidity in carrying out its assignments and is as jealous as an insecure lover of the information it has gathered.

Although officials are not discussing Mr. Hoover publicly, there is increasing discussion of the F.B.I. as an institution.

A Different Crossroads

Thus, J. Edgar Hoover is not just at another of the crossroads that have dotted his 47-year career as the bureau's chief. The focus has shifted. Washington is now talking about what is wrong with the agency—instead of what's wrong with Mr. Hoover—and the bolder officials are speculating on what should be done to the agency and who should head it when Mr. Hoover is gone.

In the last few months, since Representative Hale Boggs's charges that Congressmen's telephones were tapped, the personal attacks have dropped off.

The discussions now involve

of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Nevertheless, the criticism of the bureau tended, on the whole, to be scholarly and institutional.

One of the key questions that developed at Princeton was: Should the F.B.I. combine both criminal investigations and security surveillance—and where does one draw the line between the two?

Professor Troubled

Prof. Thomas I. Emerson, a Yale law school professor, said that what bothered him about the bureau was its work in "compiling political dossiers on people not charged with a crime or reasonably suspected of a violation of the law."

Two participants immediately replied with two questions: Would he not want the F.B.I. to look into a "political" group whose activities included violence? And who should decide what constitutes "reasonable" suspicion of violating the law?

Mr. Emerson agreed that these were tough questions. He drew a distinction between the Ku Klux Klan—which he thought should be subject to F.B.I. surveillance—and the John Birch Society, which he thought should not. But those, he acknowledged, were extreme cases.

The conference made no progress in drawing a clearer line.

Nor did the conference make headway on the question of who should decide which groups ought to be bugged, tapped and watched. Some participants contended that whoever that person should be, he should not be Mr. Hoover.

John T. Elliff, a young political scientist from Brandeis University, suggested that what was in order was an examination of the burdens that the executive branch had placed on the F.B.I. in the last 30 years.

His basic argument was: If the President and his assistants tell the F.B.I. that they want to know whether there are subversives at an ecological or consumer gathering, what bureau director is going to say, "We shouldn't try to find out."

Questions like that carried the conference to support of a suggestion heard in Washington since last spring: The creation of a board of private citizens to monitor the F.B.I.'s work. That is not a suggestion that Mr. Hoover's operating style makes him likely to welcome.

such topics as: the responsiveness of the bureau to the control of the Attorney General and the President; its role in a time of "radical" politics; meaningful oversight of the bureau's finances; the relationship between the bureau and local police forces; and the dissemination and control of computer-stored information.

One sign of the new questioning was the recent conference on the F.B.I. at Princeton University. Mr. Hoover declined to go on the ground that the participants were patently biased against him. Many of them were, as they were civil libertarians and former associates