

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

Ace Cop

FOR YEARS NOW the biggest bore on the national scene has to have been John Edgar Hoover, our tambourine-whacking Inquisitor-in-Chief.

Mr. Hoover is, to be sure, a remarkable fellow. Since 1924, nearly a half century ago, he has been head of the FBI. In that time the FBI has probably been the only non-military arm of government that has grown like the gross national product. From an outfit which dealt chiefly with bankruptcy cases and white slavery traffic, it now deals with the enforcement of more than 120 major Federal laws, and investigates the loyalty of Federal employees.

Mr. Hoover is now 76, which is certainly reason enough in itself for his retirement. There have been those who see more than a bit of senility in his recent apparent paranoia about the priestly Berrigan boys, and his petulant personal attacks on former Attorney General Ramsey Clark.

But what bores me most about Mr. Hoover is his moral bias, and the way it shows. He is the archetypal armed preacher, with the Puritan ethic as his leitmotif. It has made a difference in his seemingly interminable employment by this government. It's not a difference I have liked. Mr. Hoover likes ruling other people's personal behavior. He has enormously expanded the government's role in this field.

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BEFORE he became a cop, Mr. Hoover wanted to become a preacher. Now, as I say, he seems to have done both.

Our ace sleuth lived with his mother until he was 43, when she died. She has been described as "a strong-willed woman with firm belief in the principles of Calvinism."

His mother inspired him to become a minister. His boyhood imagination, he has said, "was captured by a young Presbyterian preacher, Dr. Donald Campbell MacLeod, who . . . symbolized the supremacy of fair play and good sportsmanship. If ministers were like Dr. MacLeod, I wanted to be one."



The evangelical tone has seldom been absent from his public utterance. He is a kind of Savonarola in a sack suit, a Wesley with a waistcoat.

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A SHORT WHILE ago he was giving out some unsolicited wisdom on two of his favorite subjects, the leniency of the courts and "the over concern for the rights of the accused."

Said Mr. Hoover in his loftiest rubrical tones: "Progress in safeguarding the personal security of the individual citizen seems to be reversing itself in some cases, back to the stone age where brute force reigned supreme.

"We have sunk into this morass through a distortion of human values. We have forgotten history's lesson that law, order and justice exist only when personal liberty is balanced with individual responsibility."

These sentiments are a curious mixture of the dangerous and the unexceptionable. The one certain thing is that public concern for private morals comes with little cogency, and with less reason, from the lips of a cop. The cop is supposed to enforce the laws, not lay them down. This distinction has been lost on Mr. Hoover by his upbringing and his own temperament.

A cop has no business, save perhaps in the privacy of his home, in making large statements about "distortion of human values." Increasingly, people are realizing that they should not be paying taxes to cops in order to have cops sermonize at them.

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THE DIRECTOR, as he is called, is also a great one for saying that crime has a great deal to do with a "gradual breakdown of the American home." This may indeed be true, but the director gives pretty scant attention to the things which cause "the breakdown of the American home" — like poverty maybe, or deep emotional disturbance arising from the frustrations of our society.

Personally, even in the event that Mr. Hoover should look more deeply into the causes of crime, I wouldn't care to have him pontificate about them. I like cops who punish crime, or better yet, prevent it; not cops who moralize about it. I hope Mr. Hoover's successor, when that day comes, is a shoemaker who sticks to his last.