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## Keeper of the files

In his invaluable study *Kennedy Justice*, Victor Navasky listed the sources of J. Edgar Hoover's power and longevity as head of the FBI. One source, he said, was the custody of shady files.

"Although the FBI has by and large been circumspect about file-leaking," wrote Mr. Navasky, "any legislator with an inclination to take on the Bureau must assume that the price for doing so may be the admission of his indiscretions into the public domain."

And not legislators alone, it would seem. That diligent sleuth William Safire has given us an interesting glimpse at the system at work at a very high level. Under the Freedom of Information Act, he obtained "a 700-page portion of the sanitized file, spanning 18 years, on John F. Kennedy." There he found certain memos written by J. Edgar Hoover between 1961 and 1963, in which the FBI director slyly and solicitously advised Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy that he, Hoover, knew of certain rumors of the president's broken engagement and how they had dried up.

The story: In 1951, John F. Kennedy had become engaged to a certain lady of Polish extraction but on the insistence of his father had broken the engagement. Later, when he was a candidate for president, or president-elect, some sort of suit was brought in New York,

apparently for blackmail purposes, but dropped on the secret payment of \$500,000.

All this Mr. Hoover knew; and he wanted the attorney general to know he knew. It may seem odd, if this story is true, that a broken engagement was thought so scandalous as to be worth half a million dollars. But evolving manners and morals are not the theme of this unpleasant little story. The theme of it, rather, is that the keeper of secret files liked to remind superiors very pointedly of his discretion.

"If true," Mr. Safire writes of the story, "it would also help explain why Mr. Hoover was President Kennedy's first appointment." That is a mischievous but pertinent suggestion. The standard story is otherwise: that Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy told his son, the president-elect, that if he intended to reappoint Hoover he might as well make a virtue of necessity. Wherein the necessity lay, if necessity there were, it is not given to us to know.

But it is a good story to learn when President Carter is in the market for a new FBI director, hence in a good position to write the job description. There may be no good way to neutralize secret files, or prevent their sly use for political and bureaucratic purposes. But the matter bears thinking about. Substantial issues of public judgment should not be affected by what the custodian of the files happens to know.