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Perspective — The FBI

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Over the years I have had a good deal of contact with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, largely in connection with security checks on various former students. The agents have, with one exception many years ago, uniformly asked intelligent questions, avoided dubious speculations, and ended up with the eminently sensible question:

"Do you have any reason to believe this individual to be disloyal to the United States?" Since my answer has invariably been, "No," the agents have thanked me and gone on their way.

In contrast, I have had real problems with Military intelligence types, also inquiring about students, who would, for instance, ask if the individual concerned had ever in class made comments supporting Castro, Khrushchev, Karl Marx or other enemies of the people. Since one of the functions of a teacher is to generate controversy and the classroom is the forum, I have always considered the teacher-student relationship privileged and have flatly refused to discuss it.

However, when I went to work in the White House, I got another perspective on the FBI, one which led me to believe that we almost had two bureaus: a non-political body out in the field, and a political cadre in Washington. One of my first tasks was to assemble the first Bicentennial commission that is, prepare a list of recommendations for the president). Hoping to avoid commer-

cialism and keep the affair on a serious track, a number of distinguished scholars, businessmen and elder statesmen emerged from the final screening, done in conjunction with my colleague Harry McPherson, and Carlisle Humelsine, the director of colonial Williamsburg, who had agreed to become chairman.

First — before submission to President Johnson — the list had to be sent to the FBI for a "Name check," a check of the records which would indicate whether any of the individuals had a criminal record, was in bad standing with the IRS, or had subversive connections. Back came the list: all passed with flying colors except a distinguished historian, Richard B. Morris of Columbia who was listed as a possible loyalty risk.

If Morris was a loyalty risk, I was a Zen Buddhist, so McPherson and I went down to see the file. The charge? In a book about political trials, Morris had been beastly to the FBI about Alger Hiss. We got the book and in our common judgment Morris's treatment had been eminently balanced, though he denied that Director Hoover could walk on the water. Armed with this, we went to the president who looked at the evidence, said, "My, my, isn't J. Edgar sensitive!", and approved Morris's appointment.