

J. Edgar Hoover

- The fallible myth

WASHINGTON (AP) — J. Edgar Hoover was bigger than life, the No. 1 patriot, the best-known American, the man of guts, the genuine legend. Hoover was the FBI and the FBI was Hoover and they were entwined in reputation: solid, incorruptible and unassailable.

By the time he died, the image had begun to tarnish. In the minds of many, Hoover was too old to cope with modern problems, too set in his ways, too content to live on glories of the past. And his power as oneman ruler of the superagency he fashioned so meticulously was, in his last years, thought too open to abuses.

Now, three years after Hoover's death, his longtime critics find confirmation in facts now emerging about the FBI.

J. Edgar Hoover allowed the FBI to be used for political purposes. He hoarded tidbits of petty gossip about public figures. He filed away derogatory remarks made about himself. He slipped information about the private lives of opponents to presidents.

But Hoover also abruptly ended the use by the FBI of break-ins and other illegal methods that were unchallenged tools of investigation for decades. And later he successfully resisted White House pressure to resume such methods.

How serious were the abuses? How much of Hoover's power was rooted in knowing where the bodies were buried or bedded? Did Hoover evoke fear among presidents and congressmen as he did among gangsters?

The complete truth most likely was buried with Hoover at Congressional Cemetery.

Whatever Presidents Johnson, Kennedy and Nixon may have thought in private, none ever spoke publicly about replacing Hoover, and he remained director of the FBI until he died.

"I admire Mr. Hoover so much as a citizen and a man," said Dwight D. Eisenhower. "Magnificent public servant," said Lyndon B. Johnson. "This truly remarkable man," said Richard M. Nixon.

How could they speak otherwise of a man who had become glamorous through so many roles: The fearless gangsterfighter of the '30s, the Nazi spy-hunter of the '40s, the unshakable anti-Communist of the '50s.

But now the post-Watergate Congress has launched the first serious investigation of how the FBI works. And for the first time ever, the FBI has admitted its transgressions to outside probers. The

ghost of Hoover must be scowling.

A new attorney general, Edward H. Levi, matter of factly ticked off the abuses:

—Hoover kept secret files of derogatory information on 17 members of Congress and 31 other prominent persons.

—Hoover, in at least one case, whispered gossip from his files to others in the executive branch in an effort to discredit a congressman who had criticized him.

—Hoover preserved memoranda about those who sought to have him fired and those who made "derogatory remarks about him."

—Hoover acquiesced as the White House, under Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, made political demands on the FBI.

Levi's predecessor as attorney general, William B. Saxbe, had spoken of FBI "practices that can only be considered abhorrent in a free society." Saxbe said that in its efforts "to expose, disrupt and otherwise neutralize" subversive elements, the FBI carried out wide-ranging counterintelligence operations.

In the name of preserving domestic tranquility, agents sent anonymous letters to discredit people or to get them fired. To create dissension within target groups, the FBI even went so far as to arrange for the repeated arrest of black militants "on every possible charge until they could no longer make bail," according to a Hoover memo that Saxbe made public.

Designated "COINTELPRO" in the FBI's shorthand, there were seven programs in all — each directed against a particular group: the New Left; black extremists; foreign espionage agents; and Communist organizations and individuals connected with them.

Still hidden from the public is the full record of how Hoover's FBI burglarized homes and offices, opened mail, bugged rooms and telephones and otherwise violated privacy without benefit of court order to make it legal.

Right or wrong, these were tactics the bureau once used against gangsters, spies and subversives, real or only suspected. But finally Hoover decreed these tactics out of bounds.

It was a decision in the classic Hoover style. To this day no one knows why he made it.

A former high-ranking FBI official recalls that in 1966 Hoover "flatly came down with a memo and said he would never again approve another bag job," the underworld term for burglary.

No one can measure the impact of Hoover's order, but it was substantial. Richard M. Nixon and his advisers worried about it in 1970 and tried to reinstate the bag jobs. Such was Hoover's power that his unbending opposition caused Nixon to rescind presidential authorization five days after it was given.

The rejected project was the Huston plan, philosophical ancestor to Watergate.

By 1970, Hoover had decided to cease cooperation with other intelligence agencies. As a former high-ranking FBI official recalls, it came about like this:

When a Czech defector in Colorado disappeared in 1969, a CIA agent asked an FBI agent about it and was told the reason: Domestic quarrel. Hoover

wanted to know the name of the FBI man who had given the information. CIA Director Richard Helms refused. Hoover cut off all FBI liaison with the CIA in mid-summer 1970.

"To have us cut off from CIA was like losing a right arm," the former FBI official said. Other FBI officials hoped to dissuade Hoover by arguing the FBI would look bad if word got out.

Hoover responded by ending cooperation with all other agencies so it wouldn't look as if the CIA was the target. "We did keep up the contacts, but it became more of an informal thing," said the former official.

In 1971, Hoover again flexed his muscle when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers study of the Vietnam war.

"We have a very tough problem here," Hoover's boss, Atty. Gen. John N. Mitchell informed the White House. "It appears that a top man in the FBI put in a routine request that Mr. Ellsberg's father-in-law be interviewed. The director has given notice that the interview and interviews of that family are not to take place."

The father-in-law, Louis Marx, was a Hoover friend.

Hoover was not ordered to pursue the Ellsberg matter.

The White House, weary of fighting Hoover, had established its own investigative unit, the Plumbers, who were less squeamish about doing a bag job in the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Hoover died on May, 2 1972, six weeks before the Watergate break-in, and Nixon directed that his successor be ordered to turn off the FBI investigation that ensued after the break-in.

Former Associate FBI Director John P. Mohr, a staunch Hoover defender, recalls "if we got information about a congressman or member of his family that reflected adversely on the congressman, Hoover made us go up and tell them."

Mohr describes those visits as a courtesy on Hoover's part. Some congressmen perceived it as a subtle message.

Levi told his congressional interrogators there is no way of knowing whether Hoover regularly passed out tidbits from his secret files, but added: "The potential effect of the mere knowledge that such files were kept in the director's office is, I think, obvious."

Hoover served under nine presidents and 17 attorneys general. In his 48 years

in office he forged the FBI into a disciplined law enforcement agency which, at his death, employed 8,600 agents, all men.