

Push
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Mr. Kelley's Contrition

IN SOME COUNTRIES, new regimes cast off old idols by pulling their statues down. The other day FBI Director Clarence M. Kelley made a speech that had about the same effect. In a lecture at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, Mr. Kelley sharply repudiated the "almost superhuman" image of the FBI during J. Edgar Hoover's 48-year reign. The bureau, Mr. Kelley said, became revered as "an invincible force for good against the forces of evil;" Mr. Hoover himself "was considered integrity and efficiency personified." This "unique position," the current director said, made the bureau immune from scrutiny and perpetuated activities which "were clearly wrong and quite indefensible"—and for which Mr. Kelley apologized.

The director's candor and contrition sounded a rare, refreshing note. Unfortunately, its public impact has been somewhat blurred because, in a kind of polyphony, the Senate intelligence committee has been releasing supplemental reports disclosing still more details of past FBI misdeeds. One report documents FBI agents' covert efforts to foment violent confrontations among black nationalist groups. Another study sets out at chilling length Mr. Hoover's bitter vendetta against Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Yet another dimension of that disgusting case has been described by Eugene C. Patterson in a St. Petersburg Times column which we reprint today. This illustrates how Mr. Hoover's lieutenants not only went along with his amoral attacks on Dr. King, but also indulged the director by telling him what they thought he wanted to hear—even if their reports were lies.

In condemning such conduct, Mr. Kelley also rejected the arrogant, dogmatic attitudes and obsessive

image-building that governed the FBI for so long. While attributing much of this to Mr. Hoover's formidable skill and self-perpetuating power, Mr. Kelley also noted, rightly, that the bureau's untouchable position had been bolstered by friends in Congress and the press. He might have pushed this point further, for it is clear by now that many other public officials—including some with far more regard for civil liberties—not only tolerated the FBI's excesses, but sometimes themselves sanctioned activities that clearly overstepped the boundaries of law and propriety, rationalizing their tacit (or perhaps even explicit) approval on grounds of national security.

By acknowledging these human frailties, Mr. Kelley has underscored the importance of rebuilding the FBI on solid grounds of law and accountability, rather than the dangerous base of personality. Considerable progress has already been made. Attorney General Edward H. Levi has subjected the bureau to an unprecedented amount of Justice Department oversight, and the new guidelines on domestic intelligence operations—while not a substitute for a new law—are a substantial gain.

While not welcoming all of this, Mr. Kelley has accepted it in a way that Mr. Hoover never did. At the same time, he has been moving cautiously—too cautiously, many believe—in an attempt to overhaul the bureau without destroying its damaged morale or provoking an all-out battle with the old-timers in its ranks. His Westminster remarks suggest that he has now decided to put more distance between himself and the factions remaining from Mr. Hoover's days. That is encouraging, for the FBI can only regain its proper strength and public respect by recognizing that, like every other human institution, it is fallible.