

Bell Writing FBI Charter; Sees No Reduction in Powers

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Attorney General Griffin B. Bell said yesterday he expects to draft a charter outlining the FBI's responsibilities by July 1, but he doesn't intend to reduce its powers.

"I don't know of anything I don't want the FBI doing that they're doing except to cut down on the background work," he told the Senate Judiciary Committee.

The background work Bell referred to is conducted on persons being considered for federal appointment or congressional jobs. He said the agency is being handed too many requests for such checks.

Establishing a charter that would spell out the duties of the FBI and the limits of its authority was one of the chief objectives Bell set for the Justice Department when he became attorney general. The department oversees the agency although the FBI has a degree of autonomy.

Bell and FBI Director William Webster testified before the committee in the first day of hearings on the prospective charter.

Some complex decisions must be made before a charter for the FBI can be presented to Congress, Bell said. One is whether the agency should

engage in only classic detective work or whether it should be responsible for finding criminal activity and preventing its continuance or recurrence.

Bell said he doesn't agree with those who say the FBI, because of past abuses, should not have a role in detecting or preventing crime.

"Surely the investigative forces of the federal government should not be monitoring the legitimate First Amendment activities of our citizens because the views they are expressing are controversial or even antithetical to our constitutional system," Bell said.

"But just as surely, the FBI should not stand idly by while terrorist groups seize hostages or set off bombs merely because the terrorists purport to act in the interest of a 'cause.'"

Another problem to be resolved is how many agencies should have authority to conduct investigations. The responsibility is shared with such units as the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which investigates bombings, and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

"What I'd like to do is get all these agencies to the extent possible under one head," Bell said.