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The FBI Paradox

There was a curiously poignant element in the recent news concerning the FBI. Two of the stories marked a new era—in some ways a better one. In one newspaper last Sunday, two headlines faced each other: one read, "26 Children are Safe"; the other read, "Kelly Sacks His No. 2." Both led into stories about current and symbolic FBI exploits.

On the West Coast, the FBI occupied its traditional role as the good guys. The nation was gripped by the horrifying story of the mysterious abduction of a school bus full of kids coming home from a swimming lark. We all were hopeful when the FBI was summoned. These were the professional, competent, paternal, efficient, skilled protectors of law and order. This was the FBI of the past, devoted G-Men of legendary valor and skill. They go about their work in the best sense as the most competent national police force in history. If anyone could help in a difficult and demanding predicament, it would be they.

Kids come away from the FBI tours in Washington with souvenir bullets, mementos from our modern Lone Rangers. That is the way it was in Chowchilla, Calif.

At the same time, East Coast news was of the continuing investigation into FBI wrongdoing. The reports about FBI agents taking the Fifth Amendment before grand juries were disillusioning.

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The abrupt firing of the second in command, Nicholas Callahan, by FBI Director Clarence Kelley, would appeal to only the most cynical critic of the battered, now reeling bureau. If corruption in this heretofore untouchable agency has crept so high, the shame must be great. If Callahan was a symbolic scapegoat, it would be the first time this model law enforcement agency has succumbed to political pressures in this particular fashion and the

shame would be, perhaps, worse. Now it is not an FBI solving the impossible and dramatic cases, but one that will cause cases to be lost because of its tactics and practices and, worse still, one *against* which criminal cases are brought.

The present paradox of the FBI is the result of its unique history. J. Edgar Hoover is the Dr. Frankenstein who created this monster in our midst. He organized and ran the most efficient and effective law enforcement agency in the world during his too-long, ill-examined reign. Over the years it became at once a powerhouse and a secret society—with all the virtues of the former and all the vices of the latter.

Sitting atop the Justice Department building, the FBI came to believe its own myth: that it was literally above the law. It was an easy step to become law breakers.

The institution became irresponsible and dedicated to its own administration more so than an accountable agency responsible to the public and dedicated to

its legitimately assigned missions. Were Hoover alive, he and the bureau could not survive the kind of penetrating investigation through which others in modern times have suffered. The big and symbolic new house at 10th and Pennsylvania Avenue is blasphemed.

The fans and defenders of the FBI now will exclaim, "Say it ain't so," like the legendary kid after the Black Sox scandal. The FBI's critics will say, at the same time, "I told you so"; the agency is as political, as fallible, as indictable as any other. Both will be right.

When my kids watch "The FBI," the television depiction of the good old crime fighters, what they see is what the middle class sees in its police force, "good guys," helpful, competent, friends in need. When they read the news—at least, the East Coast news—they will learn about "the bad guys"—corrupt, venal, self-absorbed. If they put it together, they will see the FBI in a new light—human, corruptible, accountable, a mixture of good and bad.

Just like the rest of us. At last.