

Sessions: FBI's Leader or Cheerleader?

Detached Director Raises Concerns Among Bureau Veterans

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By Sharon LaFraniere
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Every workday morning, FBI Director William S. Sessions pins his bronze badge to his shirt pocket and sets about his mission of shining up the FBI's image. He is the bureau's smiling ambassador to Congress, to police chiefs, to local Rotary Clubs. No other director has cheered so loudly or tried so hard to convince law-abiding citizens that the sometimes forbidding organization is their friend.

But when Sessions returns to the bureau's imposing concrete headquarters, his high profile vanishes and his badge is mostly what distinguishes him as the agency's head, according to former and current FBI and Justice Department officials. In the four years since he came, many have concluded Sessions is happier and more effective as bureau spokesman than bureau leader.

No immediate harm comes from such an arrangement, the officials said, because the second-tier managers are considered strong enough to fill in on substantive issues that Sessions chooses to skim over. But FBI observers are concerned about what will happen over the remaining six years of Sessions's 10-year appointment, when more than 60

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BY LARRY MORRIS—THE WASHINGTON POST

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percent of the bureau's senior staff and one-fifth of its agents are expected to retire.

"Is he the man to lead the FBI into the 21st century?" said Jack Lawn, former head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, who initially applauded the Sessions appointment. "Clearly, that's not what I hear."

FBI and Justice officials deliver such judgments with no relish, because they consider the 61-year-old former federal judge one of the nicest, sincerest, most morally upright individuals to be found heading a federal agency. He is much more outgoing than his predecessor, William H. Webster, visiting all but two of the bureau's 56 field offices, showering agents who head them with praise and picking five to advise him on bureau issues. "It's amazing how open, accessible and receptive he is to discussion," said Andrew J. Duffin, who heads the

Houston field office and serves on the advisory committee.

He is self-deprecating to the point of whipping out his green pen to excise references to himself in messages to field offices. And like Webster, he has a reputation for integrity that helps allay public concerns that the FBI will resume the intrusive snooping that occurred under J. Edgar Hoover.

Sessions loyalists say that critics, some of whom matured as agents during Hoover's autocracy, misread his genialty as weakness and overlook a quieter strength. "This director is extremely personable, and my sense is that frequently people mistake that for a lack of firmness in his leadership," said John Collingwood, head of congressional affairs. "But if you are up close to him for any length of time, you will see that is not the case. He is unafraid to take on very difficult issues, and he doesn't worry about the fallout."

Collingwood and others point to Sessions's decision to shut down Montana's only FBI field office, a move that had been recommended

for years but which deeply vexed the state's congressional delegation and its two senators. Sessions has also pushed for pay increases for agents, worked out a deal for a new facility where the FBI will computerize its antiquated fingerprinting system and championed greater use of DNA evidence in criminal cases.

Most important, he has confronted the bureau's thick mix of racial tensions, a critical area where "he is comfortable because he can take a moral stand," a former Justice Department official said. "Sessions is really trying to resolve the enormous problems of discrimination," said Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.), who heads the subcommittee that oversees the FBI and has often criticized its past civil rights record.

Sessions dismisses complaints about his leadership, saying the bureau's cases show it is "extremely vital, dynamic and producing." He says he has tried to "drive down decision-making" to those who should be responsible. By its own account, the FBI in the past four years has pursued increasingly complex cases against organized crime figures and the Teamsters, savings and loans criminals, officials and companies involved in Pentagon procurement fraud and the terrorists who planted a bomb in Pan Am flight 103.

But Sessions's disengagement shows up in small, though telling ways, according to many of the more than 40 former and current officials interviewed for this report. One former federal law enforcement official remembers a trip with Sessions that included a lengthy briefing by a CIA official. When they talked about it later, he said, he was amazed to hear Sessions ask, "Oh, was that guy who briefed us from the CIA?"

Others are baffled by Sessions's insistence that the television in his office stay tuned to CNN, no matter how important his visitor. "Not only does he have it on, but he watches it over your shoulder, like he's not really talking to you," said one prominent former agent who headed an FBI field office. "He jumped up in the middle of my conversation and said, 'What's that . . . ?' He ran around his desk and turned up the volume. Then he did it again."

His comments at meetings are

often so superficial the FBI has coined the term "Sessionsspeak," meaning a great tumble of generalities. At briefings, "he doesn't ask hard questions," one senior FBI official said.

"Webster wanted to know the answers, and why, why, why. . . . Sessions can't absorb the details. He doesn't have a deep grasp of the complexities of policy issues," the official said.

In a city where bureaucratic competition is always intense, some sense anxiety within the bureau over whether Sessions, nicknamed "Concessions," can be trusted to protect the bureau's priorities in disputes with the Justice Department or rival agencies.

For instance, funding for a sensitive FBI foreign counterintelli-

gence operation was jeopardized when Sessions, under apparent pressure from the Justice Department, allowed some of the money to be used for other projects, according to former FBI and intelligence

officials. Webster, then CIA director, stepped in to safeguard the operation about two years ago by using his authority as head of all U.S. intelligence to remove the funds

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from the FBI's direct control, the sources said. Thereafter the FBI had to go through Webster for money for the project.

When Sessions's advisory committee asked Sessions to list his priorities, as Webster did in a three-year plan before he left in 1987, Sessions did not reply for months, FBI officials said. He then said to the committee, "Why don't you tell me what you think?"

Administration officials express confidence that other top FBI officials, especially Deputy Director Floyd I. Clarke, can make the right decisions on issues that Sessions cedes to him.

Clarke "was the one you talked to

if you wanted something done," one former Justice Department official said.

Some FBI officials fear the bureau will be less able to provide substitutes for Sessions in the next five years, when so many agents reach retirement age. How Sessions will handle the delicate transition is unclear. He distressed a number of FBI and Justice Department officials earlier this year when he passed over departmental favorite William M. Baker for the job of associate deputy director of criminal investigation. Baker's disappointment figured in his retirement from the FBI this month, according to friends.

Other FBI and Justice Department officials worry that Sessions

THE FBI UNDER DIRECTOR WILLIAM S. SESSIONS

	1987	1991
Personnel		
Number of agents	9,434	10,350
Number of all employees	22,344	24,138
Budget		
	\$1.3 billion	\$1.7 billion
		(\$1.97 billion in FY 92)



MAJOR INVESTIGATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Pan Am 103 bombing: A three-year investigation into the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jumbo jet that killed 270 passengers led to the indictment of two Libyan intelligence officers.

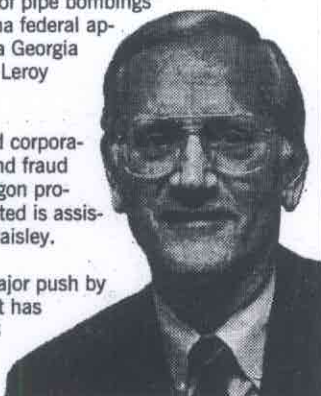
Teamsters: In a civil Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) case, the government charged that the Teamsters was effectively under the control of organized crime figures. The Teamsters settled the suit, agreeing to hold direct, secret-ballot elections of officers.

Organized Crime: The Patriarca crime family's reputed boss and seven underlings were convicted of racketeering in a case seen as the death knell for the Rhode Island-based organization.

Mail bomb murders: An investigation of pipe bombings that killed Robert S. Vance, an Alabama federal appeals judge, and Robert E. Robinson, a Georgia lawyer, led to the conviction of Walter Leroy Moody Jr.

III Wind: More than 50 individuals and corporations have been convicted of bribery and fraud following an investigation of the Pentagon procurement system. Among those convicted is assistant secretary of the Navy Melvyn R. Paisley.

Savings and Loan Prosecutions: A major push by the bureau and the Justice Department has led to the conviction of more than 688 defendants in three years.



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relies too much for advice on his wife, Alice, and executive assistant Sarah W. Munford, his former courtroom deputy in San Antonio. Some accuse Munford of making end-runs around top-ranking FBI officials on questions such as whether Sessions should make a particular trip, although Sessions said Munford makes no decisions "that she doesn't run by me."

Sessions describes his wife as "an important face of the FBI," but others in the FBI consider her overly assertive. "She wants to be his manager," one senior FBI official said. "She presumes herself to be a public affairs expert, knowing who he should speak to and who he should meet with."

Administration officials were

drawn to Sessions by his reputation as a stern but fair-minded judge in his 13 years on the federal bench in Texas. A former U.S. attorney and Justice Department official, Sessions gained national attention when he presided over the trial of several men charged in the 1979 assassination of federal judge John H. Wood.

His willingness to acknowledge the FBI's errors quickly became apparent and boosted his stock with members of Congress, who are still among his most loyal supporters. Early on, Sessions censured six FBI employees for mishandling an investigation into a group that opposed the Reagan administration's policy in Central America and resisted internal pressure to appeal a court

finding that the FBI engaged in a pattern of discrimination against Hispanic agents.

His tall, slender frame, white hair and exuberant spirit make him an appealing public emissary.

If he is criticized as not firm enough, he said, it may be because he believes that "people are to be dealt with not by a martinet but by a person who understands."

A December 1988 meeting convinced one former Justice Department official that Sessions's understanding goes only so deep. One item on the agenda of the attorney general's advisory committee of U.S. attorneys was whether FBI agents should have the power to issue "administrative" subpoenas for telephone toll records and other

documents, rather than ask prosecutors to seek a grand jury subpoena.

The prosecutors suggested they might be willing to support such a grant of authority, if FBI agents ran the subpoenas by the local U.S. attorney's office, according to two participants at the meeting. Sessions jumped on the suggestion as a reasonable compromise, only to be flatly contradicted by Clarke and former associate deputy director, Oliver B. Revell. Both men insisted that would allow federal prosecutors too much control over agents, participants said.

Sessions allowed his subordinates to interrupt him, then quietly told the group he had not considered that issue.