

Defenders of the FBI

Five retired G-men stand up for the Bureau J. Edgar Hoover built

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Since the death of J. Edgar Hoover, bad headlines have come in flurries for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Bureau has been rocked by a quick turnover of directors, by allegations of civil rights violations and overzealous domestic spying, and by indictments of some of its former top officials.

By rule and tradition, the FBI limits its employees to polite "no comments" on such matters. But retired agents are less restricted. For the first time in its long and quiet history, the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI has begun openly to defend the Bureau, its indicted officials, its past and present practices, and the memory of its much-criticized patriarch, J. Edgar Hoover.

Approached by Scene Magazine, four members of the Dallas ex-agents' chapter and their national president offered their views on controversies ranging from the Kennedy assassination to Watergate to J. Edgar Hoover's iron-fisted rule of the FBI.

They spoke out shortly before three agents were gunned down in one of the bloodiest days in FBI history — a stark reminder of the risks that transcend debates.

By SI DUNN

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You might, without glancing, pass them on a sidewalk. They still blend in. Hard training and hard experiences have stayed in their reflexes. Even when they gather once a week in a Dallas restaurant — to talk of old glories, future golf games and how the present is going to hell in handcuffs — you might mistake them for a small businessmen's fraternity out for a long lunch.

They don't look like ex-FBI agents. Take away twenty years, thirty, from their weathered faces, and they still would not have the Right Look. Not the appearances expected, a la Hollywood and television, of G-men, Gangbusters, Untouchables, legendary chasers of saboteurs, kidnapers, bank robbers, extortionists, assassins and spies.

The Right Look. They heard it all the time, from the suspects they captured and from the victims they aided. "You don't look like an FBI agent." They still smile when they hear it, years after they filed their final reports and retired.

J. Edgar Hoover, it is said, was stern on



appearances. In the early "bandit-chasing" days of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, suits and straw boaters were the uniform of the day; then, as World War II approached and the FBI added national security to its growing list of duties, agents donned the conservative attire of rising young businessmen. But the Director's fashion ideas were not always the perfect disguise. After Hoover died in 1972, and after a reasonable period of mourning, his agents quietly slipped off their outdated snapbrim hats and gabardine topcoats.

In most other ways, however, the special agents and special agents in charge who served under Hoover stay loyal to the memory and principles of the bulldog-faced man who built the Bureau into the world's most respected and feared law enforcement agency. Within the Dallas chapter of the Society of Former Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Inc., J. Edgar Hoover is remembered vividly and with awe, even by agents who met him only once or twice in their long careers. Mr. Hoover's Bureau, these Dallas ex-agents will tell you, gave them the best moments of their lives — even when their lives were on the line.

But once they talk past the good memories, the big cases, and the anecdotes on fellow agents here and gone, to their feelings about the present FBI, they perceive a confusing, unfathomable attitude, possibly even a concerted effort — within the Justice Department, the White House, the national media and Congress — to weaken the Bureau's roles and to smear

its historical image. And the ex-agents no longer can hold their anger into their self-enforced anonymity.

How is it possible, they want to know, that four former FBI officers, including Hoover's successor, L. Patrick Gray, could be indicted for alleged civil rights violations during searches for members of the Weather Underground Organization? Between 1969 and 1973, during the heights of protests against the Vietnam War, the Weather Underground claimed credit for numerous explosions, with targets ranging from Chicago police cars to the United States Capitol Building and the Pentagon.

Gray, his top assistant W. Mark Felt, and Edward S. Miller, former director of the FBI's domestic intelligence operations, were charged in 1977 with conspiring to violate the civil rights of friends and relatives of Weather Underground fugitives by approving illegal break-ins of their homes. In 1978, Attorney General Griffin Bell dropped charges against John Kearney, a fourth FBI agent indicted in the case, but not before the Society of Former Special Agents had raised and spent \$158,000 for Kearney's legal fees.

And as the trials for the other three, facing up to ten years in prison if convicted, continued to be delayed through the summer of 1979, the 7,800 members of the retired special agents' group not only had raised legal defense funds exceeding \$800,000 dollars, but had broken its traditional silence on non-fraternal matters. "The FBI takes care of its own," one Dallas ex-agent explains, "and so does the Society of Former Special Agents."

The Special Agent is the unit on which the closely knit organization of the FBI is built . . . these highly intelligent, courageous, clean-cut young men are the front line of defense against crime."

— From a 1938 issue of *True Detective Mysteries*

In retirement, or in their new careers, ex-agents tend to pursue much calmer lives. For most of the retired FBI men in the Dallas chapter, a few years or even a few decades already have slipped by since they headed or were assigned to the FBI's Dallas field office. But in their scrapbooks and memories, banner-headline kidnappings and extortion attempts blend with bank robberies, bombings, and the assas-

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sination of President Kennedy. Some chased German and Japanese spies and saboteurs in World War II, helped guard the secret development of America's first atomic bomb, helped break up the Ku Klux Klan, or sought Soviet agents as well as most-wanted criminals.

They could talk more freely now of such cases and their roles in them. But mostly, they stay off the record. Partly, this is residual loyalty to the dictums of J. Edgar Hoover: say nothing to anyone that would jeopardize a case; refer all press inquiries to your special agent in charge. Partly, it is precautionary; most people sent to prison eventually get out, and a few seek revenge. But mainly, the ex-agents' individual exploits stay known only to themselves and to a few who worked with them because time and J. Edgar Hoover have built a strong code of silence and conformity within the FBI. "It's a team effort," explains one retired special agent. "There is no one man who can take the credit for things. There are no stars."

Dallas' ex-agents do have strong opinions of the indictments stemming from the pursuit of the Weather Underground. And they back recent efforts by the current FBI director, Judge William Webster, to make the 1972 Freedom of Information Act less expensive and time-consuming for the Bureau, and less likely to reveal the names of federal informants. But the first shots, members of the Dallas group stress, should come from their current president and spokesman.

Charles Stanley, according to other ex-agents, was one of the leading reasons the Germans accomplished no significant sabotage on the East Coast during World War II. The few saboteurs who made it ashore were quickly rounded up by FBI agents under his command. Stanley now runs a hundred-year-old family hardware store in North Little Rock, Ark. The policies, he says, under which FBI agents worked until recently to protect national security were first set down in 1939 by President Roosevelt. "We had nothing (in writing) saying you can do this, you can't do that," says Stanley, a top-ranked inspector in FBI headquarters before his retirement after 33 years' service.

"The society's position is that the Weather Underground was in fact a very dangerous organization, and certainly, in our opinion, it had some foreign connections. And our main project now," Stanley says, "is to show our support for these people we feel are unjustly charged, charged with doing things that agents had been doing for years and years under many presidents, many attorneys general and many congressmen. They were given a command, so to speak, to apprehend this bunch of bombers, and in searching for them, they are alleged to have entered some homes without warrants. Certainly, an organization of seven or eight thousand people all over the world is going to make some mistakes. But many of these allegations are blown way out of propor-



Murphy, now an executive with an industrial security firm composed of ex-FBI agents, says he is saddened by criticisms of the Bureau and Hoover.

tion. We did what we thought we were being told to do by Congress, by the President and by the American public. The Vietnam War was an unpopular war, but we still had to protect the internal security of the country, whether it was an unpopular war or not. We had a job to do, and we feel that we did it."

The Freedom of Information Act, Stanley charges, "has done more to damage this country's ability to have a good security and investigative agency than any other thing. It has cost our government millions of dollars, and we feel that it must be modified."

Stanley, who worked close to Hoover at FBI Headquarters, also is critical of the late director's detractors. "Whatever Mr. Hoover did, he did with one thing in mind: what was best for his country. I believe that sincerely. And I don't believe Mr. Hoover ever, at any time, intended to violate anyone's civil rights."

William A. Murphy gazes out at the Dallas skyline for a long moment, then glances at a small color photograph on the wall of his office. He and a fellow former agent are flanking a smiling J. Edgar Hoover. "He had unswerving loyalty to this country," Murphy says, pausing to choose his words carefully. "He was one of the most persevering and hardworking men I've ever known. It has been a real saddening thing to me to see the attempts to picture him as a zealot. He established the training rules, and he maintained them. But he was a very considerate man, and he had a great sense of humor. He was tremendous to work for."

Murphy joined the FBI in 1936 at the suggestion of a friend after he finished law school at the University of Detroit. The friend said the FBI might be a good place for a greenhorn bar-

rist to get some experience in "looking the law, telling when someone was telling the truth, and summarizing succinctly on paper. In those days, Hoover's Bureau was chasing bandits and battling organized crime with 400 employees, and Murphy found the work "so fascinating, I just never thought of leaving." He helped break up the Ku Klux Klan in North and South Carolina before taking over the Dallas FBI office in 1954 as special agent in charge. Though he retired from the Bureau in 1959 after 23 years, he maintains close contact with the FBI and other law enforcement agencies, and is a former president of the ex-special agents' society. For the past sixteen years, Murphy has pursued a second career, as president of Dale Simpson & Associates, an organization of former FBI agents and police officers who now specialize in industrial security.

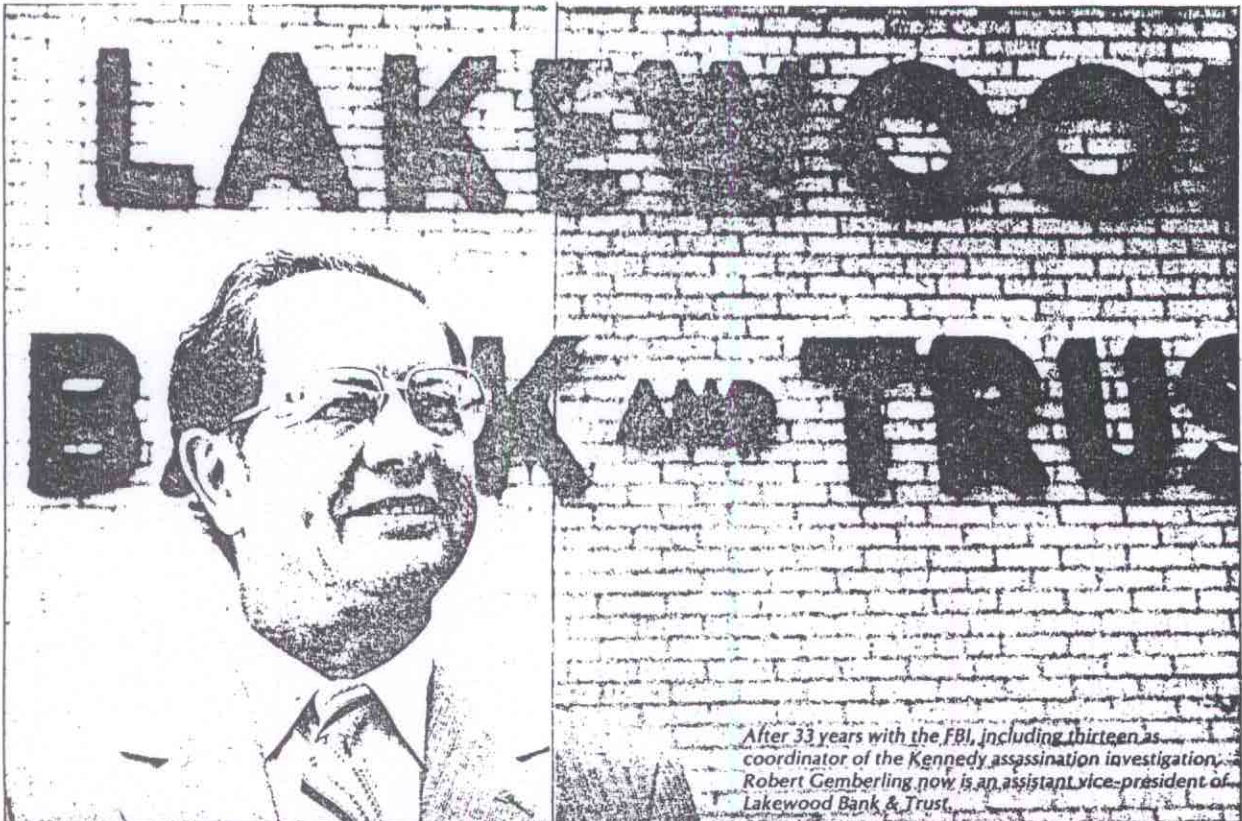
Murphy terms the indictments stemming from Weather Underground investigation an "ex post facto situation" and says members of the SFSA have mailed letters to "congressmen, senators, attorneys general and other prominent people in government expressing concern about the criticisms and the criminal action."

Two of J. Edgar Hoover's favorite sayings, recalls, were: "If you always speak in the present tense, you are seldom mistaken," and "I'd rather be a son of a bitch than a sucker."

"If we did something 98 percent right or tough apprehension, what he was most concerned about was the two percent we did handle quite the way he wanted it handled. And when he asked you to do something, you wanted it done. Now.

"One of my favorite descriptions of being in the FBI," Murphy adds, "is that it is a combination of being in the Marine Corps and in

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Jesuit Order of Priests. I hate to see anybody casting shadows on it. It just makes me sick at heart."

J Gordon Shanklin, a big man who starred in football, baseball and tennis at Vanderbilt University, practiced law for eight years before he joined the FBI in 1943. Twenty years later, and just seven months after he assumed command of the Dallas FBI office as special agent in charge, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The years of investigations and speculations cast the low-keyed Shanklin into an unceasing and unwanted spotlight. And when he retired in 1975 to be a Dallas lawyer — he is a partner now in the firm of Johnson, Shanklin, Billings, Kelton and Porter — he vowed to keep his opinions of the assassination investigations and controversies to himself. But he eased aside some of his reputation as "No-comment Shanklin" recently after the House Select Committee on Assassinations issued a report concluding that Kennedy's death "probably" was the result of a conspiracy, and that the FBI and Secret Service did not adequately protect the President.

"They haven't proven anything," Shanklin says of the new conclusions. Like Murphy, he is a man who speaks slowly and chooses his words deliberately. "We got a lot of allegations and leads. But we could come up with nothing that would prove that there was a conspiracy. Everybody was funneling information into the Warren

Commission. I don't think there has been a more thorough investigation conducted in the history of the United States. But you can't prove a negative, and it's natural for people to think that more than one person was involved. We'll never be able to satisfy everybody."

Shanklin notes that protecting the President was not the FBI's responsibility in 1963. Although Kennedy was the fourth chief executive to be slain, killing the President did not become a federal crime until a year and a half later. "There were no federal statutes covering it," he says. "If Oswald had lived, he would have had to be tried in Dallas County for murder." The Dallas FBI office, Shanklin says, remained virtually powerless to act until President Johnson issued a special directive a few hours after Kennedy's death.

Complying with the Freedom of Information Act cost the FBI \$9 million last year, Shanklin says. "It was primarily thought that it

would open up things a little more, and give the news media access to more information. But with all the amendments that were added, it has become quite a problem. It makes it extremely difficult (for law enforcement agencies) to get the sort of information you should have, and there is practically no way the FBI or other agencies can adequately protect a source of information."

Stressing that he is "on the outside now," Shanklin believes the FOIA, the indictments and recent criticisms "have crippled the FBI and the CIA." And he adds, "I'm old-fashioned, I'm strictly a Hoover type on this: what's good for us has to be weighed against what's good for one individual. You can go too far either way. You've got to have a balance. I don't see how we are going to conduct our intelligence operations unless we are permitted to keep some of our secrets. We can't tell our adversaries everything we're doing, good or bad."

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Shanklin now pursues a Dallas law practice, and tries to stay out of the continuing controversies involving the JFK assassination.

THE CONTINUING INQUIRY

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He remembers his long-time boss as "a very religious man" and "one of the great patriots of all time," a man who believed in discipline and who demanded that his special agents in charge exhibit leadership and assume responsibility."

Shanklin himself is praised by ex-agents formerly under his command as having "the patience of Job," especially in dangerous situations involving armed, holed-up fugitives and during the cracking of some of Dallas' most spectacular kidnappings and extortion attempts. Said to be a stickler for fairness, Shanklin often sought and acted on the suggestions of his agents before issuing orders.

"I was very fortunate in my career never to have had an agent killed, or lost a victim or had to kill a suspect," Shanklin says. "It

had to be the Lord helping me."

Charles Brown plays golf "in the nineties," bristles good-naturedly when friends praise "your wife's flowers," and says he doesn't watch the old television series, "The FBI," because "it's too violent. It always has to end with a shootout."

A modest man enjoying retirement after a 35-year career, Brown stays physically fit, pursues any hobby that grabs his fancy and maintains thick scrapbooks on his first love, the FBI. Although he is fond of saying, "I have no claim to fame; it's tough enough just being plain old Charlie Brown," he is remembered by others as a special agent "with excellent common sense," a man good at surveillance "because he

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didn't stand out" and good at improvising tactics in the crucial moments before an arrest.

Brown left a cafeteria chain in Washington, D.C., in 1940 to join the FBI as a messenger. The movie, "G. Man," starring Jimmy Cagney, influenced his career change, he says. His first Sunday in Washington, while still a junior assistant restaurant manager, he walked past the Department of Justice building and thought, *Gee, here's where the movie was made. "I really had stars in my eyes."* And Brown confesses that one of his still-favorite movies was made after he became a special agent — "The FBI Story" with Jimmy Stewart. "I've seen that one several times."

Brown has a small public role in the Warren Commission Report. But, like other special agents under Shanklin's command during the assassination investigation, he worked very close to history. At Dallas police headquarters, he interviewed a woman demanding to talk only with "a man from Washington." She turned out to be Marguerite Oswald. Her son, Lee Harvey Oswald, had just been identified as the killer of Dallas police officer J.D. Tippitt. After Jack Ruby shot Oswald, Shanklin ordered two FBI agents to stand by at Parkland Hospital in case the accused assassin made a dying statement. Brown and a fellow agent, outfitted in operating room clothing, watched through windows as surgeons tried frantically to save Oswald and waited to go in the moment he regained consciousness. Finally, one doctor emerged and wordlessly signaled with his hand the flat lines

now running across the screen of the oscilloscope measuring Oswald's vital signs. Moments later, the other doctors filed out, and Brown recalls, "They looked like they had been in a butcher shop."

He also remembers vividly the atmosphere of downtown Dallas on an evening shortly after the assassination. "Elm Street looked weird. The theater marquees were dark, and I saw only one or two cars on the street, and nobody on the sidewalks except a few people waiting for buses. There were pieces of newspaper swirling around in the wind. It was just like death had hit the whole place."

Brown criticizes allegations that the Warren Commission did not look beyond Oswald's role in the Kennedy assassination. "The Warren Commission considered 127 other possibilities," he says. "And a lot of people have the impression that there was collusion between the FBI and the Warren Commission. That would have had to be the most colossal coverup in history. It would have had to be a collaboration among thousands of people. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

Like other ex-agents, he also is concerned about the FOIA's impact on the FBI. "The vicious thing is how it has been used by criminals and certain groups to try to figure out who our informants are. Some people think an FBI agent can just grow a beard and go anywhere in the world. But he can't. You've got to have informants. You've got to have people who know the language and the moves" of criminals and foreign agents.



Ex-special agent Charles Brown worked very close to history and danger in Dallas. Now he enjoys golf with his wife, an assortment of hobbies and the camaraderie of the local chapter of the society of retired FBI agents.

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He remembers J. Edgar Hoover as "not the person that he has been painted. His door was always open, and he was just as human as he could be. He went out of his way to help agents with personal or family problems. But to everybody in the outfit, he was 'Mr. Hoover,' and that was the way to run a ship."

In a move unusual for ex-agents, Robert Gemberling, now an assistant vice president in charge of the recovery department at Lakewood Bank and Trust, offered himself to the public lecture circuit after he retired from the FBI at the end of 1976. He promised "a common-sense, non-political analysis of the investigation of the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy" — and found few takers. Gemberling had less personal contact with Hoover than many special agents. But he considers his last meeting especially memorable. Gemberling was in Washington in 1968 for routine administrative training. "I had just gotten my 25-year service award, and I wanted to get an autographed picture of him." Gemberling got an appointment, met the Director, and was pleasantly surprised to learn that "he knew my wife's name and daughter's name, he knew what I had been doing down in Dallas, and he knew that I wanted an autographed picture. He pushed a button, a wall opened, and there was a guy with a camera ready."

Like Brown, Gemberling, too, left a cafeteria to join the FBI. He had been working his way through a business college in Peoria, Ill., at 25 cents an hour, when he was recruited as a male stenographer. "I didn't know what 'FBI' stood for," Gemberling recalls. But as he went from friend to friend saying that FBI agents would be coming to them to discuss his background, he found that the agents already "were one step ahead of me."

He left the FBI on military leave in 1943 to join the Marines, and when he was wounded at Iwo Jima, a letter of condolence from FBI Headquarters reached his parents quicker than the Navy Department's official notification. "The Bureau looks after its people," Gemberling says.

Following the war, he rejoined the FBI, was assigned to the Dallas office in 1956 and advanced to supervisory special agent before he retired in 1976. At Shanklin's direction in November of 1963, and for the next thirteen years, Gemberling coordinated the FBI's investigation of the Kennedy assassination. He also supervised criminal and domestic security cases for a number of years.

"The press jumped on the conspiracy bandwagon and helped influence public opinion," he says. "If someone agreed with the Warren Commission Report, that wasn't news." He terms the recent House Assassinations Committee's report "a disappointment to me. I think it's a sad commentary for our money. They still haven't proved that there was a conspiracy. Everything pointed to Oswald. But we did explore the possibility of a conspiracy."

Gemberling says his report to FBI headquarters on "miscellaneous allegations having nothing to do with Oswald" totaled more than a thousand pages. "We checked every kind of informant we had, and we couldn't come up with anything pointing to conspiracy."

Oswald and Ruby, he says, "had post office boxes close together. But to make a case of conspiracy from that is stretching the thread pretty thin."

Brown concurs and criticizes the steady stream of conspiracy-theory Kennedy assassination books: "Walter Winchell said it best," he comments bitterly. "Nobody makes a buck agreeing with the Warren Commission."