

'Not Entirely Pure'

By Anthony Lewis

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BOSTON, Aug. 24—In the spring of 1976 The Tennessean of Nashville discovered that one of its copy editors, Mrs. Jacque Srouji, had been playing an undercover role for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The publisher of the paper, John Seigenthaler, decided after much discussion that her activities had been inappropriate for a journalist. On May 5 he dismissed her.

On May 13 Homer Boynton, Deputy Assistant Director of the F.B.I., was in the Washington Bureau of The New York Times talking about another matter. An editor asked him about the Srouji affair, which had had considerable publicity. Mr. Boynton replied by urging the editor to have The Times "look into Seigenthaler." He said: "Seigenthaler... is not entirely pure."

When Mr. Seigenthaler heard about that, he wrote the Director of the F.B.I., Clarence Kelley, and asked to see the bureau's files on himself. He said he was convinced that it had collected "common gossip and rank character defamation under the guise of 'investigating.'" Mr. Kelley said "I can assure you" that the F.B.I. did no such thing.

For a year Mr. Seigenthaler tried to get his F.B.I. files. Two months ago he finally received a highly expurgated set of material. Two documents were interesting.

The first was dated May 6, 1976, the day after Mr. Seigenthaler dismissed Mrs. Srouji. It was a Telex message from "Memphis"—bypassing the local or Nashville office of the F.B.I.—to "Director." As it was given to Mr. Seigenthaler, everything in the message had been blanked out except these words:

"Allegations of Seigenthaler having illicit relations with young girls, which information source obtained from an unnamed source."

The second document was dated May 10. It was a three-page Telex, and again almost all of it was excised before the copy was given to Mr. Seigenthaler. What remained referred to "rumors" and "Seigenthaler" and then said, on the top line of the next page: "involved in having illicit relations with young females."

On getting that material, Mr. Seigenthaler asked to see Director Kelley. The answer was no. Nor has the Director written him anything further about his belief, voiced in 1976 and now evidently confirmed, that the Bureau was collecting "gossip" on him. He has had a letter apologizing for Mr. Boynton's remarks to The New York Times.

We know about what the F.B.I. did in this case because John Seigenthaler is an unusually brave and determined person. Anyone who dealt with him when he was administrative assistant to Attorney General Robert

Kennedy in the 1960's soon understood his firmness and integrity. He promised to publish whatever the F.B.I. gave him in this case, and he did so in a piece just reprinted in the Boston Globe.

Even for Mr. Seigenthaler, it was evidently painful to try to deal with such a nasty smear. He stated flatly that the anonymous charges about him were false. He joked that his wife was outraged—"outraged at the F.B.I. and not at me, I am happy to report." He is pursuing a lawsuit to get the material deleted from those two documents. But the ordinary citizen would probably be helpless against such treatment by government officials.

The Seigenthaler affair makes it unhappily clear that the bad old days of the F.B.I. are not over. The extreme defensiveness of the Hoover era, when anyone who criticized the bureau was likely to be targeted for investigation, lives on. The slimy tactics against Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—running to newspapers with gossip—have not been abandoned.

Apart from the nastiness of the story, it tells us that much of the F.B.I.'s activity is sheer waste. It does solicit and file "common gossip and character defamation," as Mr. Seigenthaler said, even about private citizens. It does so at a time when the country's resources for coping with serious crime are desperately short.

All this underlines the significance of the nomination President Carter has just made: of Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr., to a ten-year term as the next Director of the F.B.I. I think there will be few things Jimmy Carter does in the White House, except for appointments to the Supreme Court, that will be as important as that nomination.

Judge Johnson is a singularly fit choice for an extremely difficult job. There has been no more courageous judge in the United States, over the last 20 years, and none more dedi-

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cated to law in its pervasive, moral, American sense. He stood up to racism and violence in Alabama. He can stand up to the pressures from within and without the F.B.I. if anyone can.

The President and Attorney General Bell deserve particular credit because they ignored the inexplicably dim suggestions of their own search committee and persuaded Judge Johnson to take the job. As a judge he spoke of "The Alabama punting syndrome"—the habit of Alabama politicians of handing tough decisions over to judges. He bore that responsibility equably. He is not likely to evade responsibility for law now, or let anyone else at the F.B.I. do so.