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Overhauling the FBI

FBI DIRECTOR CLARENCE M. Kelley's abrupt firing of his second-in-command, Associate Director Nicholas P. Callahan, is one more gauge of the gravity of the problems at the FBI. In his brief announcement Friday night, Mr. Kelley suggested that the firing is related to the current Justice Department investigations of wrongdoing within the bureau. So far, however, there is only swirling speculation about how Mr. Callahan might have been involved in the areas being probed—alleged financial corruption and the illegal break-ins that agents carried on at least seven years after former director J. Edgar Hoover ordered an end to such "black bag jobs" in 1966.

It is still unclear just why Mr. Kelley publicly fired Mr. Callahan, rather than pressing the 40-year FBI veteran to retire quietly. One factor may have been the bureau's considerable resistance to other messages that times have changed. When Mr. Kelley assumed his post in 1973, he obviously hoped to rehabilitate the FBI without dumping or alienating the formidable "old guard" remaining from the Hoover regime. However, he underestimated the magnitude of the bureau's past misconduct and the persistence of a certain independence of authority that led entrenched underlings to go their own way—while arrogantly telling the director whatever he wanted to hear. Thus Mr. Kelley was greatly embarrassed by recent disclosures showing that he had been misled, and therefore had misinformed Congress and the country, about the scope of burglaries and other unlawful operations during the past several years.

Under considerable pressure from Attorney General Levi and others, Mr. Kelley has begun to detach himself more clearly from the old regime. He has accepted unprecedented amounts of critical oversight

by the Justice Department, Congress and the General Accounting Office. In a widely praised speech in May, he explicitly repudiated the arrogance and "almost superhuman" image that the bureau had acquired during the Hoover regime. The firing of Mr. Callahan may be another step along this road. The new associate director, Richard G. Held, is not exactly what you would describe as a new broom—he is a 35-year veteran of the bureau—but he has spent relatively little of his career at the bureau's "seat of government" in Washington.

What remains to be seen is whether Mr. Kelley's latest moves reflect increasing firmness or growing frustration and weariness. It is more and more apparent that the worst attributes of the Hoover era—the dogmatism, the amorality, the air of superiority—have become so deeply embedded in parts of the FBI that they cannot be rooted out quickly or easily. External oversight and guidelines, or even a new statutory charter, will be only partial remedies. The bureau may also need a thorough house-cleaning in which responsibility is taken away from those who are still inclined toward broad domestic surveillance and are adept at such self-protective tricks as coding sensitive memos, "do not file."

Mr. Kelley may or may not be capable of shaking up the agency that much. It would be surprising if anything so drastic were undertaken before this fall's election. But the problem needs to be faced squarely—and soon. Even under the most forceful management, the FBI is likely to be in for a long, difficult period of adjustment and recuperation. This is no minor matter of bureaucratic morale. What is at stake is the FBI's future integrity and its ability to carry out its proper, vital law-enforcement role.