



FBI Director Louis Freeh on the bureau: "I never really wanted to do anything else. It seemed to me to be the best job there was to help people, to protect people."

BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

The FBI's Freeh Agent

The New Chief, Taking Names, Raising Eyebrows and Turning the Agency Around

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It wasn't long into his first meeting with FBI executives in September that Director Louis J. Freeh started getting annoyed. A no-nonsense manager, he'd asked for concise, 10-minute comments on his new plan to streamline the bureau's bloated headquarters staff.

But Assistant Director G. Norman Christensen was dragging on as he challenged Freeh over the shutdown of a small office. "That's not what I proposed," snapped the director, cutting the startled Christensen short, according to sources familiar with the session.

Within days, word began to circulate around the bureau: Christensen, a 28-year FBI veteran who ran its largest division, was being removed from his high-level post, invited to explore opportunities elsewhere in the bureau. The only immediate field vacancy: special agent in charge of Anchorage.

Nobody is yet ready to compare Freeh to the autocratic

J. Edgar Hoover, who according to FBI lore would exile those who displeased him to Butte, Mont. Freeh had other problems with Christensen, concluding that he had misled him about planning for a new FBI fingerprint facility. Nevertheless, the incident illustrates the speed and determination with which this dour-faced, 43-year-old former federal judge is moving to take control of the nation's premier law enforcement agency.

After the nightmarishly long debate over the ethical transgressions of William S. Sessions, few events in recent FBI history were more celebrated than the swearing-in two months ago of Louis Joseph Freeh. A rackets-busting undercover agent who pursued corruption on the New York waterfront, a tenacious federal prosecutor who nailed the chief of the Sicilian Mafia—Freeh had enjoyed a storybook career that seemed to make him the logical choice to lead the FBI into the 21st century.

In the cynical, scheming world of Washington, Freeh seemed straight from Central Casting: an updated version of Jimmy Stewart's character in "The FBI Story." A one-time altar boy and Eagle Scout from North Bergen, N.J.,

Freeh grew up dreaming of joining the FBI and was hailed as an ace investigator by the time he was 30. And just to complete the mythic portrait of the lawman for the '90s, Freeh is also a passionately devoted family man with four young sons. Last spring he nearly turned down the director's job, fearing it would take time away from what he views as his most important duties: tending to bedtime baths and cheering from the soccer sidelines.

"He really does sound too good to be true, but that's what he is," said Elizabeth Glazer, who worked for Freeh in the New York U.S. Attorney's office. "He inspires tremendous loyalty and affection."

Most importantly, from the perspective of senior bureau officials, many of whom had maneuvered to oust Sessions, Freeh was one of their own, a home-grown product who would stand up and fight for the institution. Some felt that "they had died and gone to Heaven," said one congressional aide. "I've never seen such a dramatic change in morale in my life," added Larry Potts, assistant director for criminal

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investigations and a longtime Freeh intimate, a few days after the director's arrival.

But two months later, Freeh has turned into a tougher and far more assertive director than anybody anticipated—and certainly no captive of the bureau's "old guard," according to bureau officials. Freeh first raised eyebrows during his swearing-in speech, admonishing his troops to stop acting like children, to end their turf wars with other law enforcement agencies and to "share your toys."

That was followed by a lightning series of moves: picking a new personal staff of loyal outsiders, eliminating nearly 50 high-level positions and naming a new team of assistant directors, including the first woman, the first Hispanic and the second African American ever to hold such posts. For years, Sessions had talked about bringing "diversity" to the FBI and, in the eyes of some, had accomplished little. Now Freeh, in one swift act, had transformed the bureau's all-white-male executive corps.

Some of the FBI's senior bureaucrats were privately stunned, complaining that Freeh was moving too fast and booting out loyal veterans as though they were nobodies. Christensen, one of the few Sessions backers, hadn't even been told by Freeh that he was losing his job when his successor called to discuss "the transition." Christensen declined to comment, and his next post remains unknown.

"It was cold and callous the way [Freeh] did this," said one FBI veteran.

But Freeh's friends say the director is determined to overhaul the FBI. His immediate goal: to transfer hundreds of paper-pushers out of Washington and back into the field offices where they can do real work, like catching criminals.

"Once Louis believes something is right, he's pretty headstrong," said Lewis Schilero, one of Freeh's colleagues during his days as an agent in the New York field office. "I don't think people down there are used to working with somebody who can make a decision and just do it."

Of Birds & Stool Pigeons

It is a gray Washington afternoon,

and Freeh is sitting in the courtyard of the FBI Building, posing for a photograph. He is gazing at the birds hovering by a statue and soaring about the large brass relief of Hoover.

"I have a question for you," he says to a visitor. "How come you

never see any baby pigeons? Think about it."

Among the talents of the new director is a well-documented rapport with animals. As a young street agent, he once put a case-clinching wiretap in the office of a mob-connected Brooklyn businessman after seducing a pack of vicious junkyard guard dogs. His technique: nightly feedings of Big Macs. "They were just pushover dogs," he said.

But Freeh is, first and foremost, a bird man. "When I was a boy, I used to have a book with pictures of all the different kinds of birds," he says.

He even used to care for some, didn't he?

"Stool pigeons," says Freeh, a mischievous smile crossing his face.

For someone at the vortex of the U.S. government's battle against international terrorism and violent crime, Freeh displays a relaxed manner and an understated sense of humor. In New York, he was a legendary emcee at ceremonial events, sardonically ribbing agents and prosecutors as they would come up to collect awards.

Freeh's friends say he is genuinely troubled by the impact his personnel changes have had on the lives of those affected. On a personal level, they insist, he is an unusually compassionate and decent person—qualities that are best illustrated by one of the more extraordinary incidents in his career, a moral dilemma he faced as a young street agent.

It was the late 1970s, and Freeh was assigned the job of arresting a

high-ranking member of the Genovese crime family early one morning at the mobster's home in suburban New Jersey. But Freeh knew the man had two small children. What would it do to the kids to watch their father hauled away by the feds right in their own living room?

"I was troubled," said Freeh as he recalled the incident recently. "A few months before, we arrested a guy in front of his kids and the kids were crying. It was something that really affected me."

So Freeh broke the rules. The night before the arrest, he called the mobster up, explained his dilemma and worked out a deal in which the target agreed to turn himself in to Freeh down the block from his home at 6 a.m.

It seemed like the perfect solution—until Freeh realized that he had potentially blown the case. "Of course I stayed outside his house all night, because if he ever ran away, I probably would have been fired, probably correctly so," says Freeh. But the target was true to his word. After his conviction, the mobster spotted Freeh in the courtroom. Recalls Freeh: "He said, 'Mr. Freeh, I'll never forget you for that.' That meant a lot to me."

The Moody Ruse

Ivan Fisher, flamboyant lawyer for mobsters and drug lords, recalls the precise moment that he concluded Freeh was the world's ultimate

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investigator. They were having dinner at a New York restaurant, swapping war stories, when Freeh told him about the time he bugged Walter LeRoy Moody Jr.

"He wired the guy in the clink!" recalled Fisher. "He tape-recorded the guy making comments to *himself*! When he first told me that, I was appalled. It didn't seem right. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I would never have been able to suppress it if I had represented the guy. It was brilliant. It was creative. Who else would have thought of it?"

The scheme was a highlight of Freeh's stint as head of one of the biggest federal cases in recent years—the investigation into the December 1989 mail bomb murders of U.S. Judge Robert Vance in Birmingham and civil rights lawyer Robert Robinson in Savannah, Ga. Those bombings, and two aborted ones, had been an enormous story, raising the specter of a white racist plot to terrorize the federal bench. Hundreds of agents from the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and other agencies were thrown into the hunt.

Appointed as special Justice Department prosecutor, Freeh arrived in Atlanta in April 1990 to find an investigation slipping into chaos. "It was a nightmare," recalled Potts, the top FBI official on the case, who added that prosecutors in three cities were running their own probes. "There was nobody in charge to make a decision."

Within days, Freeh changed that. After huddling with prosecutors and agents, he quickly mapped out a strategy and authorized grand jury subpoenas and wiretaps. "He just grabbed ideas and ran with them," said William Hinshaw, then in charge of the FBI's Atlanta office. "I think within three days anybody in that group would have walked through fire for Louis."

As it turned out, the chief suspect was not the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. It was Moody, an erratic Georgia scam artist who held a grudge over the failure of the U.S. Court of Appeals in Atlanta to overturn his 1972 conviction on charges of possessing a bomb that blew up in his first wife's hands. (Moody had intended to send the bomb to an Atlanta auto dealer who had repossessed his car.) Agents were soon able to accumulate enough evidence to arrest and imprison Moody on obstruction of justice charges. But they were stymied trying to link him to the killings

of Vance and Robinson.

Then Freeh, consulting with FBI case agents, zeroed in on something that had escaped everybody else's notice. Moody talked to himself. Perhaps he might mutter something that would be helpful, Freeh wondered. "It seemed an oddity—and an opportunity," he recalls.

The wiretaps were approved—and produced a gold mine. "Kill those damn judges. . . . I shouldn't have done it, idiot," Moody told himself. Freeh later played the tapes to the jury at the trial, helping secure Moody's conviction on 71 criminal counts, including first-degree murder. The bugging "was an obviously clever move," said Edward Tolley, Moody's lawyer, who tried and failed to have the evidence barred from the trial. "The evidence that came from that cell was devastating. It was in effect a confession."

A Case for 'Luigi'

"Louis Freeh is a quintessential product of 1950s America," says Eddie Henrichsen, Freeh's oldest friend and now chief of security for a New Jersey hospital. "He's big on family, big on values . . . I don't want to seem corny, but we spent five or six years in the Boy Scouts and that taught us a hell of a lot."

But corny it is. Born in Jersey City, one of three sons of a struggling real estate broker, Freeh attended Catholic school, went to Mass every Sunday, played Little League and was fanatic about the Scouts.

So far as anybody can remember, he had only one ambition in life. "Ever since he was a little kid . . . you know the kids would play these games, he wanted to be either Hoover or the FBI agent," recalls William F. Freeh, the director's father. "At the time, J. Edgar Hoover was big among kids."

Freeh doesn't mention the Hoover part, but confirms the basics: "I never really wanted to do anything else. It seemed to me to be the best job there was to help people, to protect people."

A graduate of Rutgers College and the Rutgers law school, Freeh joined the bureau in 1975. At the training academy in Quantico, he was an outstanding student with one large failing: He couldn't shoot straight. "He was probably the worst shot in the class," recalled Schilliro. Adds Freeh: "They had to work on me at night to get me qualified. . . . It was sort of a joke in the class."

But Freeh quickly found other ways to hit targets. As a novice agent in New York, he was assigned to a major investigation into the links between organized crime and unions (dubbed UNIRAC) on East Coast waterfronts. The case became a mod-

el—a large collaborative effort to dismantle an entire criminal network rather than picking off isolated "big fish."

"It was still one heck of a case, way ahead of its time," said FBI official Bob Reutter, one of the case supervisors. "It was fun; we had wiretaps everywhere, undercover agents."

Freeh was one of them. One of his first assignments was to investigate Michael "Big Mike" Clemente, a Genovese family crime boss who was extorting payoffs from a local businessman. "It was Louis's idea that somebody should join the health club to see if we couldn't observe them meeting," said Reutter. Freeh took the job himself.

"A lot of other agents used to make fun of me, saying, 'Hey, Freeh's just joining the health club. . . . He's in there pumping iron all day,'" says Freeh of his first big case. "Meanwhile, I hated health clubs. I hated the goddamn sauna. I must have lost 10 pounds a week, just sitting in there."

But Freeh's pose as an unemployed lawyer worked. While they chatted naked in the sauna, Clemente took a shine to Freeh, called him "Luigi," even offered to help him find a job. Meanwhile, Freeh watched envelopes changing hands—crucial evidence that led directly to Clemente's indictment.

Months later, Clemente and some of his confederates were being arraigned in federal court and the mobster still hadn't caught on. Spotting his old pal "Luigi" at the other end of the courtroom, Clemente's eyes lighted up and he started waving. Later the clueless Clemente dispatched his lawyer with a message for the prosecutors: "Leave the kid alone. He had nothing to do with it."

Today, agents in New York recall Freeh's work in the sauna as an early sign of his investigative flair. But Freeh sees a different moral to the story. "This racketeer was a human being who somehow retained a spark of decency," he told the Senate Judiciary Committee during his confirmation hearings in August. "As a child,



FREEH FAMILY PHOTO

A young Louis Freeh feeds pigeons in a New Jersey park in 1960. The onetime altar boy has a well-documented rapport with animals.

he must have had a great deal of decency."

Freeh's ability to treat his adversaries with respect accounts for one of the more remarkable reactions to his nomination by President Clinton. Not only was it celebrated by Freeh's law enforcement colleagues, it was praised by what seemed the entire criminal defense bar in New York. And among those at his swearing-in ceremony in the courtyard of the Hoover Building was a group of mob lawyers—Freeh's adversaries in the celebrated "Pizza Connection" case. The investigation and 17-month trial unraveled a mammoth conspiracy by the Sicilian Mafia to import heroin through U.S. pizza parlors. A key moment was Freeh's withering cross-examination of Sicilian mob boss Gaetano Badalamenti. But Freeh played it by the book, treated the defendants with respect and forged close friendships with most of the defense lawyers.

"Look, somebody has to be director for the FBI, and thank God it's him," said Fisher, whose client, Brooklyn mobster Salvatore "Toto"

Catalano, was convicted in the case. "He's a humane, utterly decent human being."

Going by the Book

Freeh arrived at the FBI in September with one glaring hole in a sterling résumé: almost no Washington experience. Suddenly, at a relatively young age, he was placed in charge of a \$2.2-billion-a-year agency—and a 20,000-person bureaucracy notorious for Machiavellian intrigue.

But Freeh seems intent on understanding every piece of this gigantic machine. While Sessions was a detached manager who officials say had little understanding of the complexities of bureau cases, no detail is too small for Freeh. Suddenly, field supervisors, and sometimes case agents, were being called in and asked to give Freeh briefings on investigations, such as the probes of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.). Freeh would take notes, pepper the agents with questions—and then make suggestions, according to aides.

At the same time, the bureau is facing new and larger responsibilities, among them the emergence of Asian organized crime, Islamic terrorism and urban street gangs. And just last month, under a directive from Attorney General Janet Reno, Freeh gained new powers to oversee the investigations of all Justice Department agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration and Border Patrol.

That last move raised concerns on Capitol Hill. Would Freeh become a law enforcement czar, wielding the kind of power that corrupted Hoover? In fact Freeh is very much aware of the potential dangers of the power he now has. One of the first things he did upon taking over was to dip into "J. Edgar Hoover: The Man & the Secrets" by Curtis Gentry, a highly critical biography that chronicles Hoover's massive abuses.

"There clearly were great failings there," says Freeh. "There was a time when this organization didn't investigate organized crime, there was a time it didn't investigate civil rights."

The bureau, he says, is "an incredibly powerful investigative agency" that could do "great damage to our democracy" if it is not closely monitored.

"There should be a nervousness about the FBI," Freeh concludes.

But for now, there seems to be none about Louis Freeh.