

Is the FBI Going Downhill?

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IN RETROSPECT, the protracted, tortuous and final public parting of the ways between the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its director, former U.S. district judge William Sessions, might have been a harbinger of what was to come. In the four years since Mr. Sessions was sent packing by President Clinton for what administration and bureau officials thought were abuses of perks, the FBI has shown signs of slipping away from the premier law enforcement agency it once was reputed to be. To be sure, the Hoover years hardly were a model for protection of the constitutional rights of Americans. But today's bureau has compiled a record of stature-destroying missteps and mishaps. A few glaring examples come to mind.

The bureau's world-renowned crime laboratory is less than the reliable operation it was once thought to be. Indications of evidence mishandling have turned up in dozens of cases, according to the Justice Department's inspector general. That may not seem like many for a laboratory that conducts more than a million evidence examinations a year. But hundreds of state and federal courts annually rely on the testimony of FBI experts. The possibility of contaminated evidence caused by the FBI crime lab's work is the kind of information that shakes the public trust. Two years ago, a federal audit also found discrepancies in test results and tracking cases that the FBI lab handled for state, local and federal prosecutors. To argue, as FBI officials now do, that no prosecutions have been compromised as a

result of crime-lab problems is not enough. The bureau's performance is the source of public confidence. Sloppy work or lax procedures can't be acceptable. Unfortunately, some other confidence-shaking episodes have taken place.

The FBI allowed itself to become politicized when it saluted the Clinton White House and issued a requested press release justifying the incoming administration's unjust firing of travel-office workers. It also later let down its guard when it willy-nilly turned over more than 900 sensitive FBI files—including those of former Bush White House officials—to staff in the Clinton White House.

Document shredding? Obstruction of justice? Who would have expected to see a senior bureau official plead guilty to destroying key evidence in the Ruby Ridge case. It happened. And the FBI's investigation in the Atlanta bombing case? The bureau's treatment of Olympic Park security guard Richard Jewell was a source of embarrassment to both FBI Director Louis Freeh and the agency. And despite the fact that 13-year FBI veteran Earl Edwin Pitts was caught and arrested, the bureau has seen one of its own charged with conspiring to commit espionage for Moscow.

None of this is to suggest that the FBI has reached an end-stage as an investigative agency. It hasn't. But the bureau has sustained some truly serious damage that must be repaired if the loss in confidence is not to become permanent.