

FIVE

Flacking for the Bureau

THE FBI'S MAIN THRUST was not investigations but public relations and propaganda to glorify Hoover. Everyone who worked in the bureau, especially those of us in high places around him, bear our share of the blame.

Flacking for the FBI was part of every agent's job from his first day. In fact, "making a good first impression" was a necessary prerequisite for being hired as a special agent in the first place. Bald-headed men, for example, were never hired as agents because Hoover thought a bald head made a bad impression. No matter if the man involved was a member of Phi Beta Kappa or a much-decorated marine, or both. Appearances were terribly important to Hoover, and special agents had to have the right look and wear the right clothes.

One day Hoover was going up to his office in the elevator when a young man, a clerk, wearing a red vest under his suit jacket got on with him. And as if the red vest wasn't bad enough, the poor fellow's face was broken out. As soon as Hoover got to his office, the order went out to find the young man with pimples wearing a red vest, fire him, and discipline the man who recommended him for employment.

Though a bald-headed man wouldn't be hired as an agent, an employee who later lost his hair wasn't fired but was kept out of the public eye. Nathan Ferris, who came from the family that invented the Ferris Wheel, began his long career with the FBI with a full head of hair but was bald by the time he worked for me at headquarters as the man in charge of all our foreign offices. One day in the early 1960s, Nate came to me to say that his fondest wish was to close out his FBI career in our Mexico City office where he had once worked. Nate and his wife, who was Latin, both loved Mexico so much that he

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It was fine with me and I told him so, but there was one problem. The men in our foreign offices were always on display, meeting people, speaking in public—in short, spreading Hoover's public relations message abroad. "Nate," I said to him, "you know what the policy is on bald heads. How am I going to get you a job in Mexico?" Ferris admitted that he had a problem, but he wanted to try anyway, so I okayed Ferris's request and sent it on to Al Belmont, who was the number three man at the time. Belmont called me as soon as he got my memo.

"Why the hell," he wanted to know, "did you send me this memorandum on Ferris? He's bald; Hoover will never approve him." When I explained to Al how much the job meant to Ferris, he agreed to try to push the transfer through, but we both knew the odds were against Nate.

Al called me a day or two later, laughing like hell. "I finally put something over on that no-good bastard Tolson," he said. Tolson, who was Hoover's closest aide as well as his closest, indeed only, friend, saw everything that went to Hoover and he met with Belmont when he received Nate's request for a transfer to Mexico.

"Belmont," Tolson said to Al, "I seem to remember that Nate Ferris is bald."

"Oh, no, Mr. Tolson," Al told me he said, "you're thinking of another fellow," and named another agent who was totally bald, even balder, than Nate was.

Tolson looked hard at Belmont, and then his face lit up. "You're right," he said, "that is who I'm thinking of," and he approved the transfer and passed the request on to Hoover, who was the last hurdle. Hoover had a rule that no man was to be sent out to a foreign office without a personal interview with the director. But Ferris was requesting his transfer at the director's busiest time of the year, just before his annual testimony before the House Appropriations Committee. As this appearance determined the FBI's budget, Hoover prepared for it very carefully. So Nate and I decided to try to get around the personal interview by writing Hoover a letter. We flattered him for about a page and a half, saying Nate knew how busy he

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