

## The FBI Study

Post 9/18/73

The Department of Justice has undertaken a thorough review of the functions and the operations of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The news came almost as a throwaway at the end of the hearings on the nomination of William D. Ruckelshaus to be Deputy Attorney General, rather than as a splashy revelation of a major initiative. But the news is no less startling, refreshing or welcome on that account.

The 48-year tenure of J. Edgar Hoover as FBI director had left a heavy mark on the bureau and had given it a virtually untouchable status. It had become, from those outward appearances the public could discern, an extension of the personality of the remarkable and in some ways inscrutable man who had headed it for so long. As his tenure lengthened, his views seemed to harden and it became increasingly more difficult to question the way the bureau did its business or anything else about its operations. A study of the scope of the one now being done by the Department of Justice would have been scorned and the motives of those who proposed it would have been severely questioned.

That fact alone explains why the new study is so necessary and why the news is so startling. There can be no question that over the years, presidents as well as attorneys general have given the FBI new tasks with a good deal more concern in their minds for the need at hand than for the bureau's ability to do the job or for the appropriateness of assigning it the task in the first place. Such questions coming from other quarters would have been perceived as *ad hominem* attacks on the director and would have been dealt with as such.

But that is not the case now. There can be no question about the appropriateness or the importance of the questions that Mr. Ruckelshaus says are now being asked. The widespread suspicions about the bureau's wiretapping activities—bolstered by revelations relating to the Watergate scandals—need to be laid to rest, as presumably they will be by the examination of the wiretap function which has now been undertaken. Other questions under review are also of enormous importance: whether

intelligence gathering should be separated from crime detection; how long the director should serve; what his relationship to the attorney general should be; whether the FBI's investigatory techniques, including the use of informers should be revised; whether the bureau should even be in the Department of Justice and a number of others.

There are two other areas which, though implicit in the things Mr. Ruckelshaus had to say the other day, seem to need explicit investigation on their own. The first is ideology. In Mr. Hoover's last days, it was widely believed that many policy and investigatory decisions proceeded from a political orthodoxy based on the director's views rather than from more neutral non-ideological imperatives. Although a number of the questions being reviewed touch on that issue, none of them confront it directly.

Mr. Ruckelshaus came close to the second issue when he said, "There is unquestionably a need for review of the bureau's intelligence-gathering authority by the executive branch and by Congress. It needs to be carefully defined . . ." We would agree with that assessment but would hope that those conducting the review would add to that part of the study the development of procedures to purge the FBI's raw files, both current and future, of material that can have no bearing on criminal or national security matters, but which could serve to embarrass innocent citizens.

Others would doubtless have other additions for the list, but it cannot be denied that Mr. Ruckelshaus' catalogue appears admirably comprehensive. The spirit in which the department has undertaken the inquiry is also commendable. "Instead of a wide gulf between the Congress and the FBI," Mr. Ruckelshaus said in answer to a question, "there should be closer coordination." That new spirit and the investigation which accompanies it are two of the healthiest developments in the field of governmental reform that we've seen in this town in quite some time.