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Hoover's Empire Abroad

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J. EDGAR HOOVER has quietly won President Nixon's approval for an expansion of the FBI's international intelligence-gathering operations despite grave misgivings in the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency.

That will put the Federal Bureau of Investigation in over 25 foreign capitals, unauthorized specifically by law and unknown to the public or most congressmen. Moreover, these FBI agents, supposedly stationed abroad to help apprehend fugitives from U.S. justice, are transmitting secret intelligence reports back to Director Hoover.

This bizarre story casts further light on two intriguing aspects of Hoover: First, his undiminished ability, born of four decades of experience as the bureaucrat supreme, to get his way in Washington; second, the tenacity of Hoover's passion to get the FBI into the spy business and his animus toward the CIA.

The overseas FBI agents are called, officially and euphemistically, "legal attaches" and are assigned to U.S. embassies abroad. Legal attaches have long performed useful work in

Ottawa and Mexico City, helping track down fugitives. Similarly, the case can be made for agents assigned to London, Tokyo and perhaps one or two other foreign capitals.

But Hoover has gone far beyond this. Shielded from public and congressional scrutiny, he has quietly built an overseas network of FBI agents in some 20 countries. The latest step came last year when the director proposed expansion into another dozen capitals, and showed his legendary deftness in the bureaucratic jungles by going right to the top for approval.

In a private conversation at the White House with President Nixon, Hoover casually brought up his desire to establish a few new legal attache offices. Like most Presidents of the past 47 years, Mr. Nixon has no desire to cross the director. He agreed.

Thus, Hoover went to the State Department armed with the President's prior approval, a *fait accompli*. State Department functionaries, faced with cutbacks in the demoralized Foreign Service, were appalled at presidential approval for a dozen legal attache offices

containing two to six FBI agents each. Across the Potomac River, CIA officials eyed Hoover's overseas expansionism suspiciously.

In tedious negotiations, the State Department managed to cut back Hoover's expansion by about half. Finally, the FBI proposed opening new offices in six additional cities: Manila, Rio de Janeiro, Singapore, New Delhi, Canberra and Santo Domingo. Although the location of legal attache offices is a closely guarded secret, it is understood that FBI agents will now be placed in all of these cities with the possible exception of New Delhi.

IN OTHER WORDS, Secretary of State William Rogers, who as attorney general under President Eisenhower in the late 1960s gave Hoover free rein at the FBI, decided not to make an issue of Hoover's worldwide expansionism. One reason is assurances, given to both the State Department and CIA, that the overseas FBI agents will be operating strictly under the U.S. ambassadors and will not be gathering foreign intelligence.

The truth is otherwise. The "legal attaches" are re-

quired to send foreign intelligence reports back to Hoover through FBI channels, unseen by State Department or CIA. Indeed, the director himself has reprimanded legal attaches for failure to send him sufficient intelligence material.

The caliber of the intelligence picked up by the overseas FBI agents is considered suspect by intelligence experts, however. Barred from conducting overseas operations, the legal attaches tend to pass along gossip picked up on Embassy Row and in the coffee houses. Whether the thousands of tax dollars spent for this purpose is justifiable is therefore questionable.

But, as we have reported in earlier columns, the FBI's own outstanding agents know that the bureau could stand substantial improvement in carrying out the tasks Congress has assigned to it—particularly apprehension of foreign espionage agents in the United States. In view of that, Hoover's overseas expansionism, condoned by the President and the Secretary of State, seems particularly inappropriate.