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FBI Rides Out Assault

PRINCETON, N.J. — Anybody interested in the cooling national temperature should examine the conference on the FBI which took place here in Princeton last weekend. For what shaped up as an exercise in radical chic attack turned out to have a story line a good deal less predictable than the Efrem Zimbalist show.

In the course of the conference, the achievements of the bureau were abundantly highlighted, and sympathetic attention was directed to its future problems. One thing that finally emerged was a sense that running the bureau well would be harder than ever once J. Edgar Hoover finally stepped down.

At the outset, to be sure, there was plenty of uncritical anti-Hooverism at work. The Committee for Public Justice, which sponsored the conference along with the Department of Politics at Princeton University, had put together a speakers list dominated by professional haters of the FBI. And in the opening sessions they did their stuff.

I. F. Stone delivered a paper detailing what he asserted was the bureau's role as a political police beginning with the Palmer raids back in 1919 and 1920.

Frank Donner of the American Civil Liberties Union and Professor Thomas Emerson of the Yale Law School set out in abundant detail a record of violations by the bureau of the basic liberties guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.

A SEMI-HYSTERICAL account of J. Edgar Hoover as publicity-seeker was delivered by Robert Sherrill of The Nation magazine. And many of the charges were backed up by a group of former agents and informers for the FBI who had been assembled for the occasion.

But Professor Duane Lockhard of the Princeton faculty took sharp exception to putting J. Edgar Hoover on trial. And a series of participants, many with practical experience in law enforcement, directed the conference to concrete cases.

Burke Marshall and John Doar—two former Assistant Attorneys General under John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson—addressed the problem of the bureau and civil rights. Marshall argued that the bureau had moved into the field no slower than the rest of the United States government. Doar, in a detailed paper prepared with Dorothy Landsberg, showed that once the bureau was into civil rights, it "demonstrated in some of the toughest law enforcement assignments imaginable, exactly how and why it had earned its reputation for thoroughness, persistence, and tough-mindedness in responsible law enforcement."

Two very tough former federal prosecutors, William Bittman and William Hurdley, looked at the FBI as an investigative agency. While they found some lapses, particularly in going after organized crime, their general report was that the bureau did work of very high quality.

A bunch of local law enforcement officers spoke to the question of the bureau's influence on police departments throughout the country. They praised the bureau's role in initiating more systematic work in the past. They complained that the bureau was not doing that work now, and that the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, which was supposed to do the job, was a "check-writing" agency without any influence on police practice.

THROUGHOUT the conference, moreover, Walter Pincus, a journalist with extensive experience around the Congress, kept emphasizing the role that senior federal officials play in shaping the bureau's work. He was able to show repeatedly that the bureau acted in response to things done—or not done—by Presidents, and senators and congressmen.

Nobody can say with confidence what emerged from

the conference in the end. But plainly the FBI was discussed in a normal way—not as some outlandish fiend. There was a good deal of concern—voiced particularly by Roger Wilkins, a black lawyer who had served in the Justice Department with the rank of Assistant Attorney General—about keeping the bureau up to a high level of performance in the future.

Above all, the bureau was not made a scapegoat. Indeed, at one point, what had started as a congress of militant oppositionism was warned by John Doar not to attack the FBI simply because "we feel more comfortable criticizing bureaucracy than criticizing ourselves."

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