

NO LEFT TURNS

An agent's bizarre reminiscences from inside Hoover's FBI

By Joseph C. Schott

In 1948 the author began his 23 years with the FBI. Although only a clerk, he soon learned that the first rule of survival was the demonstration of loyalty—to the Bureau and its omnipotent director, J. Edgar Hoover.

Manifestations of loyalty were numerous. During my era as a clerk the assistant director who handled public relations for the Bureau was a big, dark man called "Nick the Greek" by the clerks and supervisors. Like most of the truly dedicated men of the inner circle he demonstrated his dedication to the Director by spending long hours in the office and creating the appearance of working himself to death. Occasionally he would fall out of his chair with a crash. The assistant director was a large man, so the crash was always loud enough to attract witnesses: clerks, stenographers, and underlings who enjoyed the

show as a break in dull routine. The FBI nurse always hurried in with smelling salts and soon had the Greek propped up at his desk again, flailing away at his papers.

On one occasion The Washington Post printed a story especially disturbing to the Director. The Post printed so many stories that disturbed him it would probably be impossible to identify the particular one at this late date. Whatever it was, the story was printed, and the Director summoned Nick the Greek. Since the editor was beyond his reach, the Director attacked the Greek for failure to prevent its appearance,

as though he had some control over it.

"Mr. Hoover," Nick the Greek allegedly said, "If I had known that they were going to print those subversive, Communist-inspired lies about you, I would have gone over there and hurled myself bodily into the presses."

That answer, according to the grape-

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vine, pleased and even amused the Director. "Nick may not be very smart, but nobody can doubt his loyalty," he is supposed to have said.

The Last File

I began doing a lot of file-chasing for supervisors of the Special Inquiry section. Most of the special inquiries came from the White House and were considered "hot" because they had short deadlines. They were expedited to the point of hysteria. A hundred or so supervisors were jammed into the offices of the Special Inquiry section, and from dawn until dusk they sat behind piles of files trying to compose, from information in the various files, memoranda on the individuals inquired about. Many of the names came in without sufficient identifying data, and sometimes the inquiries were duplicated—two or more requests would come in on the same person—in which case two or more supervisors would be simultaneously doing the same work and fighting each other for the same files. Even when different individuals were involved, so many of the names being searched appeared in the same files that it was not unusual for several supervisors to need the same ones at the same time. They continually hid them from each other, because each was worried about his own deadlines and no one else's. I brought files in by the cartload and took them back when the supervisors finished with them. I also had to try and keep track of who had which files and referee fights between supervisors who wanted the same ones at the

same time.

Extra desks had been jammed into the rooms, and everyone fought his private deadline battle behind his file stacks, snarling viciously at anyone who tried to remove any from his desk. The reviewers thumbed through the volumes and mumbled into dictaphones, transferring the bones from one graveyard to another, so to speak. On those rare days when there were only a few names coming in, the reviewers hid behind their stacks and read newspapers. To read a newspaper at SOG (Seat of Government: FBI headquarters in

Washington) unless it was some assigned task like reading the Daily Worker for Communist Party intelligence or reading the New York and Washington newspapers for derogatory or laudatory references to the Director, was a punishable offense. But the supervisors were so isolated behind their files that on one occasion one died and no one else in the room knew it for a long time. He just put his head down on his desk and never lifted it up again under his own power. A friend came by at lunch time to see if he was ready to go across the street for a sandwich and found him face down on his desk, dead from a heart attack. He had been dead for more than two hours. His passing had gone unnoticed because the others were so busy pumping paper to the White House.

The Pinhead

There were a lot of nagging, worrisome jobs in the Bureau, but being a New Agents counselor was one of the worst. Some of their problems were unbelievably whimsical.

One of the most whimsical I ever heard arose from the presentation of a New Agents class to the Director. In those days it was part of the training ritual of the classes—each 30 to 40 strong—to file quickly through the Director's office to be favored with a sharp glance, a brisk handshake, and a nod before being hustled out the other door. Since the individual's time under Directorial scrutiny amounted to only a few seconds, this particular incident illustrates The Man's acute powers of ob-

ervation and capacity for quick decision. It also illustrates the ability of those around him to improve upon his instructions.

The New Agents, clad in their dark suits, white shirts, and subdued neckties, flitted by in front of the Director, shaking hands and bowing jerkily like marionettes on strings, and hurried on out. The entire class passed before him within a minute or two.

As the last one disappeared through the exit, the Director said to the counselor of the training class, "One of them is a pinhead." Get rid of him!" Then he went into

his private office and closed the door behind him.

Of course, the counselor did not dare ask the Director for additional information to identify the pinhead. He dared not ask the Director anything. Instead, he went to the classroom where the New Agents were assembled and addressed them for a time on some pretext or other, peering at each, trying to identify one whose head looked unusually small. He was unsuccessful. Then the solution struck him. He would check their hat sizes. In those days all agents were supposed to wear hats while on duty, and naturally this rule was strictly enforced at SOG. New agents kept their hats in their individual clothing lockers while taking firearms training at the FBI Academy at Quantico. A day or so later, while the class was on the firing range, the counselor and one of his assistants checked the hats in the lockers. They found that the smallest hat size in the class was six and seven-eighths. But the hell of it was, there were *three* members of the class with that size. There was no help for it: All three sizes six and seven-eighths were fired.

Upon graduation as new agents, the author's class was given a final harrowing lecture by a top official, one Troutmouth.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you are now on your way to the Field where you must bend every effort to live up to the grand traditions of this organization and the splendid example set by your Director. You will find the Field to be full of pitfalls and temptations. Some of you will not survive them. Recently in one of our West Coast offices an incident occurred illustrative of such pitfalls. The Special Agent in Charge (SAC) of the office was being transferred

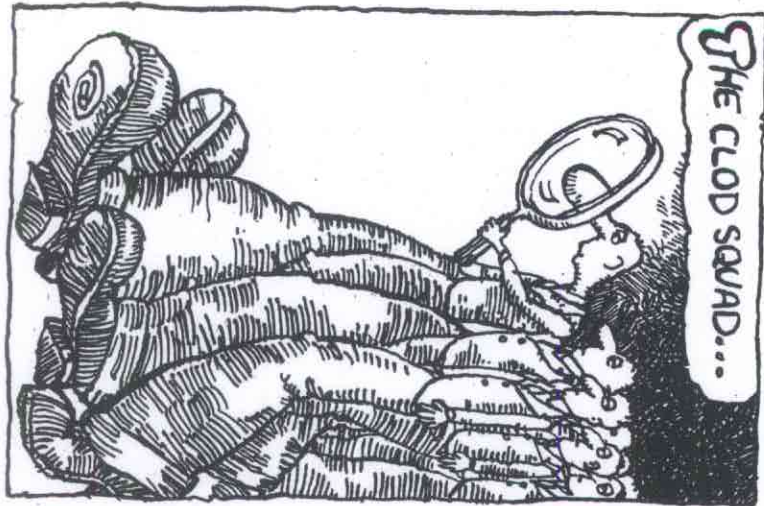
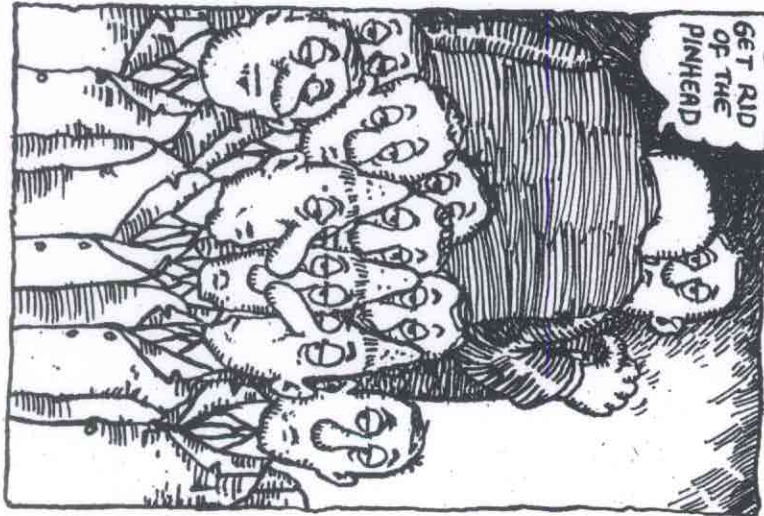
back here to assume a higher post at the Seat of Government. The members of his office decided to honor him with a farewell party. The place chosen for the party—or I should say, the place ill-chosen for the party—was a local nightclub whose owner was on friendly terms with many members of the office. As the party progressed, most of those attending looked upon the wine when the wine was red, gentlemen. In short, they became intoxicated. The climax of the party was the presentation to the Special Agent in Charge of a farewell gift—an elaborate and expensive pen and pencil set. The presentation was made in a unique way. It was brought to him on a satin pillow borne at arm's length by one of the nightclub performers—a young Negress clad only in high-heeled slippers, red slippers, I believe. A nude Negress, gentlemen," said Troutmouth, hissing on the sses as usual. "A nude Negress presented a Special Agent in Charge of the FBI a gift on a satin pillow in front of a large group which included not only Bureau employees but also outsiders. When the news of this event reached the Director, which it did very quickly, by means of an anonymous

In this book the names of all those who did anything grossly contrary to Bureau rules and regulations and those who were disciplined and thus embarrassed have been suppressed or changed to protect the guilty. Names of places have been changed. Someone may read an anecdote in this book and screech, "That's me! That son of a bitch is talking about me." Don't be too sure. Many of the events described were not one-timers; some are composites.

letter, I was dispatched as the Director's personal representative to investigate the matter. According to all reports there had been at least a hundred Bureau employees at this party, but I could not find a single one—with the exception of the Special Agent in Charge—who would admit having been in the dining room when the nude Negress appeared bearing her satin pillow. Twenty-three of them, I recall, stated they were making a phone call from a pay booth nearby at the time. Gentlemen, there is only one telephone booth anywhere near the ballroom where the presentation occurred. Twenty-three midgets could not have crowded into it. The same applies to the fifty-odd who swore they were in the men's room answering a call of nature at the time. Gentlemen, the men's rest room at that nightclub was equipped with the barest essentials—a commode, urinal, and lavatory. The rest room itself—I measured it—was six feet by eight feet. The idea that fifty or more full-grown men had crowded in there on that fateful night was absurd. Needless to say, gentlemen, that Special Agent in Charge is no longer with the Bureau. He betrayed the Director's trust. Many, many of those who attended the party were severely disciplined." Troutmouth paused for dramatic effect. "I am relating to you this sordid story just prior to your departure for the Field as a warning . . . This is the type of conduct the Director will not tolerate, gentlemen. Remember that every act on your part after you leave here, either at home or in a public place, as long as you are employed by the Bureau, is a direct reflection on this Bureau and its Director."

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Illustrations by John Heinly



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With that final horror story fresh on our minds we departed for the Field.

Clod Squad

It may sound a little crazy, but for us non-nailbiters this danger of disciplinary action was what made Bureau service exciting. The game was to break or bend the rules without getting caught. Most of us who survived for years in the Field became, by necessity, expert players. Of course, occasionally someone lost and a thunderbolt from SOG landed with a crash on his head. Those nearby who emerged from the smoke unscathed would shudder with relief and marvel at the degrees of overkill.

The Field people were not the only ones to tremble when the thunderbolt landed. Assistant directors, inspectors, and other SOG officials could also be busted. To protect themselves, they constantly had to prove their devotion to him by improving on his orders, making them more strict and the penalties more and more severe, even when their own peers were concerned.

On one occasion at SOG, just prior to dismissing one of his executive conferences of high-ranking Bureau officials. Mr. Hoover said suddenly, "I have been looking over the supervisors at the Seat of Government. A lot of them are clods. Get rid of them." Then he disappeared into his inner office. That statement led to the formation of an investigative panel to identify and expel the clods. The panel became known in Bureau history as the Clod Squad.

Of course no one dared ask the Director to identify any of the clods or to elaborate on his observation in any way. That might have proved fatal

to the career of the questioner. So the Clod Squad concentrated on finding supervisors with traits known to be despised by the Director, especially complacency, that cowardly lack of burning desire to ascend in the Bureau. The most common mark of the complacent SOG supervisor was his yearning to stay where he was, in the same job he had held for years, hiding in a cubbyhole. The really courageous and noncloddish supervisors burned with the desire to return to the Field as

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had built snug nests in Silver Spring, Rockville, Alexandria, and Falls Church, and had joined country clubs where they played golf and bridge. They had found a home at SOG. But now they had to produce some sacrificial clods to satisfy the Director until he found another project to occupy his mind.

One former clod told me, "They would call you in and ask all sorts of questions about why you hadn't asked for transfer to the goons or for promotion to ASAC. They asked me, 'Why haven't you asked to be a New Agents counselor?' Nobody in his right mind would volunteer for that job, but of course I couldn't say that. 'I just haven't gotten around to it yet,' I said. After the interview I went to a member of the squad who was a supervisor in the Administrative Division, a clod if there ever was one. I told him confidentially he could identify me as a clod if he would get me a transfer to a field office near my home. He worked it out with the other members. They made it sound like a disciplinary transfer and the Director went for it. I didn't give a damn. Me and the squad were both satisfied. I got a transfer home and they got credit for identifying a clod."

So a zany, antic war went on constantly and grew wilder as time went by.

Far Out

Agents assigned to one-man RAs—Residents Agencies—working out of their homes in hamlets in western Oklahoma and Kansas and the Far West, getting into the headquarters city only once or twice a year—tended to wander off the FBI screen after a while and go native. They would appear in headquarters city dressed like cowboys or shepherders or reservation Indians wearing plaid shirts and cowboy boots and large hunks of silver and turquoise jewelry.

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SACs and ASACs (Assistant Special Agent in Charge, and lash their unwashed mobs into submission. The problem was that most of the Clod Squad members, SOG supervisors of long standing, fell into the complacent category. They were themselves clods under their own definition. They did not want to return to such primitive frontier posts in the Field as Memphis, Omaha, or Little Rock. They

Many SACs encouraged these characters to stay home and visit headquarters as infrequently as possible.

Sometimes those assigned to two-man RAs deteriorated more than the loners. After an extended period of time together they began hating each other's guts. In one instance the two came to a logical solution: One worked days and the other worked nights, and they left notes for each other about telephone calls and messages. They would go for weeks without having to look at each other.

There was a two-man RA in which the pair became so antagonistic they built a plywood partition dividing their single office. Each occupied a separate cubicle. Just above their desks was a square opening in the wall with a flat board shelf across the bottom. On this shelf they placed the telephone. When they were in their cubicles at the same time they took turns answering the phone. The phone would ring and a disembodied voice would say, "It's your turn." A hand from the other side would reach up and take the receiver. The answerer might say, "It's for you." The receiver would then pass between upraised hands. In this way they could communicate without having to look at each other.

Dread Inspection

The most excruciating times for SACs came when inspection teams arrived to look for dreaded "subs" (substantive errors). "Arthur" was called to Washington to take his browbeating as Special Agent in Charge of an office found wanting during inspection.

Arthur finally got in to see The Man (Hoover) and took his blast. Since the charges

were serious, he got a good one. When he stumbled out, he was on probation and could expect another office inspection within ninety days. When he touched base with the assistant directors, they talked to him in guarded tones, and only in the presence of witnesses, treating him as though he had a contagious disease. Even his "rabbi" (close advisor) acted aloof, trying to find an excuse for not going to lunch. He finally agreed to go but suggested an out-of-the-way place. There they huddled in

a booth, and Arthur poured out his woes to his rabbi, while the rabbi kept looking over his shoulder and saying, "Kind of keep your voice down, Arthur, won't you? Try not to get so excited. I'll do what I can. But you know I've got to protect myself too."

Then Arthur went back to his field office and every time the Bureau telephone rang he jumped as though someone had slyly tweaked his genitalia. He was waiting, waiting for the drop of the second shoe—the appearance of the inspectors.

One day he received a long distance call. It was from his rabbi at SOG. "Arthur, I'm calling from a pay booth at the bus station, because I don't want this going through the switchboard at the B. You're going to have visitors tomorrow and there's a contract out for you."

"C-contract? Are you sure?"

"Yeah," said the rabbi, "The dominant theme is 'misplaced confidence.'"

"Muh-misplaced confidence?"

"Well,—Arthur, you don't think the Old Man is going to admit he made a mistake in promoting you in the first

place, do you? Let's not be naive. He says he trusted you with an assignment and you let him down. You know, 'misplaced confidence.'" Then the rabbi hung up.

Instead of mobilizing the troops to blitz the filing cabinets, walls and desks, Arthur went out and got plastered.

The goons flew in next day and for the next week or so it was Custer's Last Stand all over again. This time the Indians had AR-15s instead of bows and arrows and F-111s for air support. Arthur stood on his little mound of high ground chopping back at the painted savages with his singing sword and ducking the bombs that rained on him from heaven.

"I give him credit," said one of the agents from that office later, "Arthur really fought back. He found where some of the goons were having a drinking party one night after work and when they left the place driving a rented car, he had them arrested for DWI. He fired that off to the Bureau and that got the senior inspector chewed out and the three aides busted. Then he had a stroke of pure luck. One of the girls from the steno

pool came to Arthur privately and told him that one of the young aides had patted her on the butt and tried to make a date with her. She also said that another of the aides had propositioned one of the other girls in the office. The steno wanted to know what to do. Arthur was delighted to tell her. 'It is our duty to inform the Director!' he said. Arthur knew that both those aides were married, and this little escapade would finish them off as far as the Director was concerned. He marched both girls in to confer with the senior inspector. The senior inspector turned pale when he heard the news, but he tried to play it down. Boys will be boys. My God, this might blow his career out of the tub!

"Arthur picked up the telephone and called the assistant director in charge of the Inspection Division personally, displaying the reckless courage of someone with absolutely nothing to lose. 'These inspectors of yours are trying to turn my office into a whorehouse,' he yelled at the assistant director. 'This is the worst example of misplaced confidence I have ever seen. I can't even get the senior in-

spector to do his duty.'

"The assistant director said he would be down on the next plane. He instructed the senior inspector and the two fanny slappers to stay in the office until he got there, no matter how late his plane came in. It was after midnight before he arrived, and by then Arthur had obtained signed statements from his two stenographers describing the lewd and lascivious advances of the two aides. The senior inspector, smelling sulphur in the wind, took detailed confessions from his two sex fiends.

"After the assistant director had read the statements, he called in the two aides and asked in a disarming, jovial fashion what their offices of preference were. One of them said New York and the other said Los Angeles. 'Fine,' he said, 'the one who wants to go to New York will go to Los Angeles and the one who wants Los Angeles will go to New York, and you will probably stay there for the rest of your natural lives as far as the Bureau is concerned. If you want to resign here and now that's O. K. with me.'

"When do we have to go?"

one of them asked.

"Next plane,' said the assistant director.

"What about our families?' one asked.

"That's your problem,' said the assistant director, 'but you are not to go back to Washington for any reason until given permission.' They took off in opposite directions that night. God only knows what they told their wives."

"What about Arthur?"

"Oh, Arthur came out of it smelling like Arpege. The Director decided that a guy with his talent was being wasted in a field office so he was promoted to Number One man in the Inspection Division at SOG.

The Seat

"I would like to say something about the chair you had to sit in, in the Director's office, and also about the way the Director's desk was situated," said one former ASAC who had been shot down at such low altitude his sense of humor had not been seriously damaged in the crash. "The Director was sort of short,

see, so he had his chair and desk raised some way so that no matter how tall you were, you were always below his eye level when you sat in front of his desk. The chair had a pneumatic cushion with a very slow air leak. As you sat there, you felt yourself slowly, slowly sinking, until he seemed to tower over you as you tried to look up at him between your knees and write in the goddam notebook. After a few minutes in that chair, if you were as tall and skinny as I am, you felt like a stork trying to sit in a water bucket."

To Texas

In the fall of 1959 the Director must have been pawing through the seeds of time—as the Bard has phrased it—trying to decide which grains would grow and which would not. The seeds were Presidential aspirants. As a result of the pawing, he decided that destiny called him to Texas for a visit. The particular Lone Star seed which excited his interest was Lyndon B. Johnson. So it turned out that J. Edgar Hoover and his associate director, Clyde Tolson,

appeared on the blasted heath of Texas that fall to examine this exciting seed at close range.

The offstage signal that presaged their appearance was not a foreboding drum but a ring of the telephone in the office of the Fort Worth Resident Agency, where I was assigned, one bright morning in early November. It was the SAC in Dallas calling. He spoke at some length with Tom Carter, the senior resident agent. During the conversation Carter's good-humored expression gradually became glum. When he had hung up, Carter said, "The SAC wants me in Dallas this morning. The Director plans to come to Texas next week to visit Lyndon Johnson in Austin. I'm supposed to help out."

"Austin is in the San Antonio division," I said.

"There are no direct non-stop flights from Washington to Austin," said Carter. "The Director will fly to Dallas, and I have to drive him to Austin in a car."

"Will it be bad?" I asked.

"It can't be good," Carter said. "I was assigned to the Oklahoma City office in 1938

when he came down to accept an honorary degree from Oklahoma Baptist University at Shawnee. It wasn't much fun. He and Mr. Tolson can really keep everyone on edge."

"Will Tolson be here too?"

"Oh, yes," said Carter. "Wherever the Director goes, Mr. Tolson goes too."

Clyde Anderson Tolson, Associate Director of the FBI, was the Director's closest friend. He had the reputation of being the super hatchet man in the FBI, an agency swarming with hatchet men.

"Well," said Carter, "if you just look at the whole thing as a sort of nutty vaudeville show, maybe you can keep your sense of humor and make it to retirement without developing an ulcer."

At a meeting to discuss the impending visit:

"The route to Austin presents problems," said the SAC.

That broke my reverie. To drive from Dallas to Austin, all you had to do was head south about two hundred miles on a broad interstate highway that was divided into four lanes most of the way.

"There's no sweat about that, Boss," I said. "We just

get on 77 and aim south—"

"There's one catch," said the SAC. "There will be no left turns."

That startled everybody. But, of course, there was a good explanation. In California several months before, the Director's chauffeur-driven car, while making a left turn, had been struck by another car from behind. The Director had been shaken up. He had been sitting on the left side behind the driver. Now he refused to sit on the left rear seat any more and had forbidden all left turns on auto trips.

"He makes Mr. Tolson sit behind the driver now," said the SAC. "According to Callahan, the Director calls that side the 'death seat.'"

"They could both sit on the right side," said Carter, "if one would sit in the other's lap."

The SAC frowned at Carter. "This is nothing to joke about, Tom. You know how dead serious anything to do with the Director or Mr. Tolson can be."

"Just kidding, Boss," Carter said.

Looking at Sid Bowser, the SAC said, "Sid, you are re-

sponsible for the hotel accommodations at the Sheraton for Monday night. Do you have your instructions straight?"

Sid consulted some notes on a sheet of paper. "Need suite consisting of living room and two bedrooms. Each bedroom must have private bath. Each bedroom must have double bed. Mattresses must be not too hard, not too soft, must be just right. Four pillows on each bed—"

"Down pillows!" said the SAC. "Down pillows on each bed!"

"O.K., O.K.," said Sid, making a note. "Four down pillows on each bed. All appliances in rooms, such as radios and television sets, must have typed instructions explaining how to turn on and turn off. Typing must be neat. Check closely for misspelling and typographical errors. Decorative flowers may be placed in suite living room but not in bedrooms. Basket full of fruit may be placed on coffee table of living room. If liquor placed in suite, Director drinks Jack Daniels and Mr. Tol—"

"Jack Daniels *black label*, Sid!" said the SAC. "Let's get

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that right!"

"O. K., O. K." Sid made another note.

"You see?" The SAC looked around at us with an I-told-you-so expression. "You see why we have to plan and plan and plan these things? One little slip and Mr. Tolson will eat up this office like I used to eat Cracker Jacks when I was a kid."

If a visit from Hoover and Tolson was upsetting, working at close quarters as a Tolson assistant was an exercise in dread and drudgery—but sometimes quite illuminating. The author asked a former Tolson assistant about Hoover's relations with Robert Kennedy.

"Tell me about Bobby and the dart board."

"Well, the Director said that when he and Mr. Tolson went in, Bobby was sitting in his shirt sleeves behind the desk throwing darts and kept on doing it all the time they talked. In other words, he did not give the Director his undivided attention. The Director said he had served under a score of Attorneys General during his time in government and it was the most damnably undignified con-

duct he ever witnessed. He was especially disturbed because Bobby frequently missed the target and the dart stuck in the wall paneling. 'He was like a child playing in a Dresden china shop,' the Director said. 'It was pure desecration. Desecration of government property. The problem was that the child could not be disciplined. He happened to be the Attorney General of the United States and his brother was President.' The Director said that he and Mr. Tolson cut their visit as short as possible and both agreed that it was the most deplorably undignified conduct they had ever witnessed on the part of a Cabinet member. Of course, I had already heard about the AG telephone incident, but he didn't talk about that."

"What was that?"

"Oh, for years the Attorney General has had a direct telephone to the Director's office. It was always kept on Miss Gandy's desk. When Bobby called and got Miss Gandy he told the Old Man to put the phone on his own desk. He said when he called on that phone he wanted to talk to the Director, not the Director's secretary. Of course, for

years Mr. Hoover never had to take any crap off an Attorney General. He just dealt directly with the White House and let the AG go fly a kite. But this was something new. This AG was the President's brother. It would be very difficult to wire around the President's brother. So the Old Man, very reluctantly, had the phone moved to his desk. Well, on that Saturday after the assassination, after Jack Ruby shot Oswald in Dallas and President Johnson had issued an executive order for the FBI to investigate, the Old Man and several of the assistant directors were in his office making plans. The Old Man had talked with President Johnson personally several times that day. In the middle of the conference, the AG telephone on his desk rang. Mr. Hoover didn't answer it, so everyone tried to ignore the ringing. When it finally stopped, Mr. Hoover said, 'Put that damn thing back on Miss Gandy's desk where it belongs.' They called the telephone company and had it done right away. I don't think that he ever spoke to Bobby after that. He damn sure never talked to him over that phone." ■