

Post
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Light 'Locker Room' Chatter

By William Greider

Not a great book, not even a good book, hardly a book at all when you hold it up to the light. Some would even say it is a rotten book. Still, there's something about "No Left Turns" you have to like, maybe because it is so honestly shabby.

There is no pretence of substance, only a crude collection of anecdotes strung together by a writer and teacher named Joseph L. Schott, who resists any pressure to derive deeper meanings from his material. His prose is a light skip, descriptive and authentic, but excessively coarse, like the language which young men use

among themselves in an Army barracks or the giddy after-shower chatter in a high-school locker room. Unless you are one of the guys, it all sounds forced and flat.

Only, wait a minute, because Schott is an ex-FBI agent (who writes well, amazing in itself if you have ever read the Dagnet prose of FBI memos). And his "locker room" is the human space behind the gray facade of that great government detective agency. His real-life characters are all the hapless good old boys, like himself, who somehow wound up playing G-Man beneath the supermyth of J. Edgar Hoo-

ver, bulldog defender of American orthodoxy.

The experience of reading this book is exactly like listening to several hours of "war stories" told in a barroom by nostalgic old soldiers—only these veterans served in a peacetime Army and, therefore, all of their recollections of derring-do are strained. They lived in constant peril, continually struggling to avoid disaster, yet the dangers were mainly bureaucratic. Would the maniac sergeant discover the beer smuggled into the barracks? Will the imbecile company commander march us through the mud puddle or around it?

From the Boys in the Bureau

Inside the FBI, as Schott remembers it from 23 years as a special agent, the perils were the "rules" — incredibly complicated and petty, even perverse regulations of performance which Hoover issued to the "Field" from his personal Olympus in Washington, "SOG" (for Seat of Government, as he insisted on calling FBI headquarters). It is impossible to summarize the insane tyranny of these thunderbolts except to say that Schott succeeds in making them believable.

"Had all the nutty rules, orders and instructions been carried out to the letter simultaneously, the organization would have collapsed from internal

explosions like those funny cars the clowns used to drive at the circus," the author explains. But Schott thinks the Hoover dictums had a genuine purpose essential to the director's legendary control over his troops: "maybe the Director's master plan was to submerge the Field in so many rules and regulations that all of them could not possibly be adhered to. All of his employees would be chronically guilty of breaking some rule or other and thus constantly eligible for disciplinary action if the Director saw fit to dish it out."

See BOOKS, B7, Col. 2



Book World

The FBI Game

NO LEFT TURNS. By Joseph L. Schott.

(Praeger, 214 pp., \$7.95)

BOOKS, From B1

Thus, as seen from the ordinary agent's viewpoint, the FBI was a permanent game of hounds-and-hares with normal people doing incredibly ridiculous things to duck and hide, dodge and deceive. An internal language developed to describe the game: The "clod squad" sought out wayward supervisors inside SOG—Seat of Government as Hoover insisted on calling FBI Headquarters — (because Hoover once remarked that a lot of them were clods). An inspection team would often come to town with a "contract" out on the local special agent in charge—meaning the inspectors were

determined to find enough punishable errors to produce his lighting transfer to some dismal post. Harried or ambitious agents cultivated back-channel allies higher up in the SOG machinery, known as "rabbits," who would alert them to marauding inspectors and other dangers. The "stats" were everything, incompetence could hide behind sheets of numbers on arrests, investigations, stolen cars recovered, the only protection against the random malevolence of SOG.

"It may sound a little crazy," Schott confesses, "but for us non-nail-biters this danger of disciplinary action was what made Bureau service exciting."

The most bizarre character is Hoover, of course, whom we only see from a distance. The title, "No Left Turns," was a SOG command to Texas agents driving Hoover from Dallas to Austin—since Hoover had experienced a minor collision on the left side of his limo, he concluded that left turns were especially hazardous and, therefore, there would be no more of them. His insistence on certain rituals, including total supine obedience and adulation from his subordinates, is not really very amusing, however, when you consider the political power which this man held for so many years.

Perhaps someone who was closer to the man himself would make Hoover look more like a human being, but Schott's twisted portrait may be more relevant to what the FBI did as a public agency. Every large organization tends to reverberate with the idiosyncracies of its leader; in Hoover's case, the result was not only the FBI's legacy of blindness and inefficiency in doing its real job but its obsessive search for imaginary demons in the society.

Schott does not draw

these conclusions. Indeed, he refuses to climb above an agent-eye-view of the agency and offer his own formulations of the price which the FBI paid for effectiveness in exchange for that protective myth of Hoover. Perhaps, Schott's story would be less convincing if he had mounted that soapbox. Still, it is too bad because he seems to be so well equipped to make some judgments which outsiders can only guess at.

Anyway, the point is that Schott's book is an important antidote to the TV-and-radio myth which we all grew up on—the invincibility of Hoover, the awesome efficiency of silent federal men who always got their man, even when the local cops failed. It's good to get that romance behind us. It must be especially good for the people who work in the FBI.