

J. Edgar Hoover

Political Game-Player

By Tom Wicker
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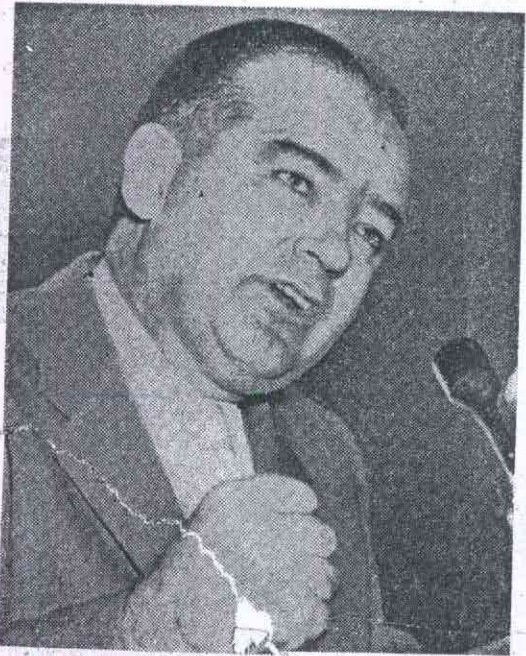
ONE OF THE achievements with which J. Edgar Hoover is most frequently credited is "keeping the FBI out of politics." A primary reason why his compulsory retirement was waived, it appears, was the notion that he was somehow more nearly above politics than anyone who might succeed him could possibly be.

In fact, Hoover has not been overtly partisan. But he has played the political game in Washington to the hilt. In 1968, in fact, he came dangerously close to mixing directly into the Presidential campaign. Reacting with asperity to Eugene McCarthy's campaign calls for his resignation, the director wrote in *The FBI Bulletin*:

"All Americans should view with serious concern the announced intentions and threats by a political candidate, if elected, to take over and revamp the FBI to suit his own personal whims and desires."

This was a serious and misleading distortion of what McCarthy had been saying. Repeatedly, McCarthy had said approximately what he said in Portland on May 27 — that he would fire Hoover because "everybody knows that in a formal sense the FBI is subject to the attorney general, but you allow someone to be built up like J. Edgar Hoover — it's as though he's not to be challenged."

Nearly two decades earlier, another McCarthy got kinder treatment from the director. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin appeared to Hoover — as one close friend of both recalls — "a gutsy kind of guy who was getting picked on. Ed-



THE LATE SEN. JOSEPH McCARTHY
"Gutsy guy getting picked on"

gar has great sensitivity to somebody who gets picked on for fighting in the Communist field."

Nor was Hoover a paragon of nonpolitics when he testified publicly and repeatedly against ratification of the consular treaty with the Soviet Union, on grounds of the treaty's alleged threat to internal security. So powerful is his influence on the Hill that his statement almost single-handedly stymied the treaty, even though all the rest of the Johnson Administration was for it.

In a more general sense, Hoover has always been keenly aware of political realities. He managed for years to steer clear of labor corruption and civil-rights cases, both of which have high political potential in Congress.

Presidents, of course, have had differing relationships with Hoover. Nixon has visited the director's house for dinner, which is more than he has done for most Cabinet members. Johnson had lived on the same Washington street with Hoover for many years, and they maintained a close personal relationship.

President Kennedy, whose quick reappointment of Hoover in 1960 was described by an associate as "a cold political thing," hardly knew him and was not interested in the Bureau's activities. At the urging of Attorney General Robert Kennedy, he did arrange one luncheon with Hoover — at which, by all accounts, the director delivered one of his lengthy monologues on the Communist threat and left the President muttering that never again would he go through that experience; and he never did.

Ironically enough, only a man of Hoover's proven strength and public reputation might be able to stand up against a President who used his personal relationship with Hoover to make improper or dubious requests; for even a President would think twice before risking a public dispute with an icon like J. Edgar Hoover.

As much as any other reason, this makes the choice of his successor excruciatingly important. Hoover may sometimes have been "too strong" in his unique office, and he is no longer the forceful leader who made the Bureau a great investigative agency.

For all his faults, it cannot be said of J. Edgar Hoover that he has frittered or thrown away the essential integrity of the powerful position.

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WHEN THE DEMOCRATS returned to power in 1961, there soon followed a considerable changeover in the corps of Federal attorneys. When this was well-advanced, the new attorneys were brought to the Justice Department to get acquainted with the home office. One of the big events of the gathering was a reception to be held in the office of J. Edgar Hoover.

The attorneys lined up eagerly; it was, after all, a lot harder to see the legendary Hoover than Bob Kennedy.

They proceeded single-file through three antechambers into Hoover's private office, where not many outsiders ever penetrate. At the far side of the room stood the director himself, shaking hands one by one. Just behind him was [redacted] and wh

each visitor had grasped Hoover's hand and passed through the door, he found himself in the corridor. That was the "reception."

This story aptly suggests the lofty position J. Edgar Hoover has made for himself from such materials as the Federal Bureaucracy, his own personality and character, and the achievements of his agents. Folk hero, political sacred cow, a powerful establishment all by himself, he will be impossible to replace when the time finally arrives. Neither will it be a simple matter to duplicate his strengths or to avoid his weaknesses.

Virtually everyone interviewed believed the new director should come from outside the FBI — primarily because they believed he should be a man of independent stature, able to command public attention with his own voice, strong enough to stand on his own feet both within the Bureau and within the Justice Department and the Administration it serves.

Such a man, it is true, might establish a dominance over the bureau akin to Hoover's. For that reason, students of the FBI generally believe, it would be best to appoint someone nearing the end of a career, for whom being director of the FBI is an arrival in place rather than a stepping-stone.

One frequent suggestion is that the director should also have only a five-year or perhaps a six-year term, so that his need for reappointment could act as a check upon his powers.

In fact, given the dimensions of the job, it



EUGENE MCCARTHY
Call for resignation



On a rare occasion when Hoover, left, attended a social function in Washington, he stopped to talk to Martha Mitchell, next to him; Minnie Pearl and Attorney General John N. Mitchell

may well be wondered whether the next man will fill it as well as J. Edgar Hoover has. If he had only retired 20 years ago, there would be little question about it.