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# Dancing to J. Edgar's Tune



A DECISION made early last autumn at the highest levels of the Nixon administration to try to ease out J. Edgar Hoover as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was sidetracked when President Nixon himself changed his mind.

The scenario worked out called for a dramatic summit meeting at the White House between President and director in which Mr. Nixon would praise Hoover and then ask for his resignation. The meeting took place, but the President never spoke his lines, never asked Hoover to quit.

Now, in a presidential election year, administration officials believe it is too late to dispose of Hoover until after the election. Yet, these officials are of the same mind they were in writing last autumn's aborted scenario. They feel the FBI is in trouble—trouble that cannot be dealt with until Hoover is gone.

This bizarre situation underlines one of the major arguments for Hoover leaving: after 47 years running the FBI, Hoover's independent political power is so formidable that even the President himself shrinks from asking him to quit and will

not even consider removing him in an election year.

In fact, administration officials are so awed by Hoover's popular support that they will not publicly admit any displeasure at all. Their public position is that the 77-year-old Hoover can remain as director (1) as long as he wants to and (2) as long as he is physically and mentally capable, adding hastily that both conditions now prevail.

Their private opinion is something else. They concede that the FBI has gone downhill as a law enforcement agency and squarely blame Hoover. Only a new director can reform the bureau they believe.

Although right-wing groups staunchly defend Hoover from all attacks and leftists regularly demand his dismissal, the question is not basically ideological. Thus, the leading advocate of Hoover's dismissal inside the administration is one of the Justice Department's most militant anti-Communists and law-and-order advocates: Assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian, a Goldwater Republican not hitherto accused of liberalism.

From the time he took over the Justice Department's

Internal Security Division in November, 1970, Mardian has been shocked a Hoover's autocratic rule of the FBI and his hostility against any supervision from the Justice Department. Mardian's disaffection may have reached its peak last spring when Hoover, running from responsibility for dealing with the Mayday demonstrations in Washington, barred FBI officials from all the department's strategy meetings.

MOREOVER, Mardian is well aware of the little known truth about the FBI today: with agents unequaled as law enforcement officers, its present performance is well below what it could be or should be. Far too much attention is spent on arresting petty thieves and catching army deserters, not nearly enough on domestic intelligence and foreign espionage agents.

The FBI's inadequate record in the security field is attributed directly to Hoover. Although excoriated by civil libertarians, he actually has placed severe restrictions on use of wiretaps and other techniques by his agents in security and intelligence work. Why? Fear of unfavorable publicity.

But worst of all is the shocking state of the bureau's morale. Justice Department officials and U.S. attorneys complain that highly competent agents are stripped of imagination and daring for fear of taking an unusual initiative that might bring a dreaded letter of censure from the ubiquitous director. No agency in the government is so widely and closely controlled from the top by a single man.

The result: most agents, particularly those in security work, would welcome a new director even though they subconsciously fear what might happen to the FBI, molded for 47 years in Hoover's image, when the change comes.

But few agents in the field think that time will come soon. The purge of high FBI officials who had been privately critical of Hoover, including some with close contacts in the Justice Department, deeply impressed agents in the field with Hoover's undiluted and dangerous omnipotence. They also find the same J. Edgar still making even presidents dance to his tune. At least until after the 1972 election, President Nixon will keep right on dancing.

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