

J. Edgar Hoover *Post 5/3/77*

Few, if any, men in the history of the United States have accumulated so much power and wielded it for so long as did J. Edgar Hoover. His career as a public servant spanned a fourth of the history of our nation. He was a force to be reckoned with in national affairs before two-thirds of all the citizens alive today were even born. His power and influence, measured as such things are in Washington, far outweighed that of the men he nominally worked for—the attorneys general—and sometimes seemed to surpass even that of the presidents, if only because he was here when they came and they knew he would be here when they left.

While we did not count ourselves among Mr. Hoover's great admirers—especially in his later years—we would not minimize those genuine contributions he made to the well-being of the country. His early fame was based, and rightly so, on his performance in taking an incompetent and corrupt investigative service and turning it into a fully professional and honorable police force. During the '30s, when heroes were scarce and public distaste of police corruption was widespread, he filled a public need by projecting the image of the perfect cop. That image lives on—tarnished somewhat by events of later years—in the awe and respect

that most Americans have for the words Federal Bureau of Investigation. Throughout it all, Mr. Hoover may have made his single greatest contribution by consistently and fervently rejecting the idea of certain great expansions in the FBI's authority and jurisdiction, an idea that could have developed easily into a national police force with all the potential evils of such a system.

With all this, and more, to his credit, it is sad that Mr. Hoover held on to the power that was his so long. His failure for years to admit the existence of organized crime and his reluctance to accept denials of civil rights as an appropriate object of investigation for his agency are blots on the FBI's record. There were similar blots on his own record—the attacks on Martin Luther King, the concealment of wiretapping activities, the use of FBI dossiers for purposes other than law enforcement, the occasional forays into political and even foreign policy issues. These were mostly indiscretions of his latter years and we prefer to think of them in terms of the abuses that occur when men hold so much power for too long. It would have been better if Mr. Hoover had trained his successor and stepped aside some years ago. As it is, we hope that it will be the good he did and not the bad that lives on.