

The man who stayed in power

He went without warning, at night, confounding friends and critics. It seemed so simple and quick, a kind of last gesture of defiance to those who suggested he had lost the old touch for detail. The legend was left intact. At an incredible 77, still astride his vast empire of over-and-underecover agents, J. Edgar Hoover had gone.

He was building the biggest building in the heart of town, he commanded the most effective police force in the world, he had the best budgetary batting average on Capitol Hill, his finger touched more individual lives more deeply than almost anybody but the President. He was easily the most powerful full-time bureaucrat that this republic has ever produced. Hoover was the godfather of Pennsylvania Avenue, a don imposing his own Roaring-Twenties, super-clean, tommy-gun morality on a fractious family. He dispensed his blessings with care and certitude, guided by granite convictions of right and wrong. In his last years he seemed to cling to the old glories of the time when he had been young and building the FBI, darting his old man's anger at those who questioned the intrusions of his agency into private lives, steadfastly refusing to retire. There was the smell of horseflesh and white

linen, double-breasted suits and straw hats and cigars about Hoover. And there was something else: power. He lived near the hem of the White House, quick to welcome each new conqueror to the Oval Office with a sensitive note of approval. In times of stress he sent flowers. He was never quite as personal a friend of Presidents as he (and sometimes they) suggested. But he was close in there, near the heartbeat of power.

I remember being startled, at Hyannis Port on that cold Nov. 10, 1960, to hear President-elect John Kennedy announce his intention of reappointing Hoover. It was one of Kennedy's first appointments. Youth was triumphant. Camelot was just over the horizon. But suddenly there was Hoover, 65, with cold eyes and that chin, sharing in the euphoria of victory. Later on, of course, the doubts arose. When John Kennedy scrutinized one of the FBI reports which had been requested on each of his staff members, he was shocked at the welter of confirmed and unconfirmed gossip, scandal and hearsay that he found. He gasped and told his aides that he would never read another such dossier, and he didn't. Still later, it would be Hoover who called Robert Kennedy to announce, curtly, "The President's dead," on that day in Dallas.

Lyndon Johnson was not so squeamish about FBI reports. L.B.J. ordered up some on the men he was contending with in his stormy stewardship. He wanted to know his adversaries and, yes, his friends, in every dimension. It was fully in keeping with the way he had operated since the start of his political

career. Johnson had gained power by searching through a man's strengths and weaknesses until he found that special handhold. Hoover was in a fine way to help him out, and he did. Johnson thumbed those folders the way other men thumb racing forms. I remember hearing L.B.J. tell about watching a prominent Republican member of Congress on television during the 1964 campaign. The man had been going on about "morality," and Lyndon was chuckling over what he had just been reading in one of Hoover's dossiers about that particular man's morality.

By all traditional measures, Johnson and Hoover should have got along splendidly. But it was L.B.J. who made Ramsey Clark attorney general. Those days were for Hoover almost as unhappy a season as when Robert Kennedy held the job. Both Clark and Kennedy worried about the men and women whose personal secrets were caught in the endless FBI files. They were profoundly concerned about unknown agents prying open lives for unexplained reasons. It was they who raised the first full doubts about the wisdom of one man having so much unchallenged authority.

The coming of Nixon was for Hoover a renaissance. Law and order were the passwords. Evil and good became more distinct and easily definable again. There was flint-eyed John Mitchell as attorney general, hailed enthusiastically by Hoover. Now the director had the President to dinner at his house, and Nixon marveled at the gewgaws and knickknacks that adorned Hoover's dim chambers. The President brought the director to Key Biscayne for dinner one night and then, a special badge of esteem, loaded him on Air Force One for the flight home. Still, even with Nixon in the White House, things weren't going all that well down at the Bureau. Hoover seemed to be more worried about his image than about catching criminals. His men felt it. There was inefficiency and dissent, a shadow of doubt smirching the legend. Part of it, a lot of it, was Hoover's refusal to leave—at 65, at 70, even at 75.

Now, that is past. There will be a special emptiness down along the Avenue. I've lost count of the times I've ridden or walked the famous mile from Capitol to White House in inaugural parades or funeral corteges or moments of national triumph. Almost every time when we passed the FBI building I looked up and there was J. Edgar Hoover on his balcony, high and distant and quiet, watching with his misty kingdom behind him, going on from President to President and decade to decade.

In 1955, Hoover jovially accepted a medal from his fifth President, Dwight Eisenhower

