

'The FBI' Investigates the

By Bill Wallace

To many Americans, FBI agents are superagents capable of cracking complex criminal cases — incorruptible agents who track their prey relentlessly. Ronald Kessler, a former staff writer for the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post, punctures this image in his well-researched study, "The FBI." Kessler lays out the agency's clangers as well as its triumphs and reveals the incompetents hiding in its ranks.

In recent days, some of Kessler's research has been questioned by FBI officials who dispute his claim that many high-ranking former and current U.S. officials have been implicated as spies in a rash of recent FBI investigations.

Although the FBI confirms it has "opened a number of cases related to the activities of the former KGB and its successor agency," it denies that the volume of cases is as large as Kessler suggests.

Wrongdoings Uncovered

Whatever the number, there is little question that the bulk of Kessler's work is accurate. In fact, while researching the book, Kessler uncovered wrongdoings — that the New York Times later called "a seemingly endless record of chiseling and expense account padding" — that led to the ouster of former FBI Director William Sessions earlier this year.



Ronald Kessler punctures FBI

"The FBI" concentrates on the agency's history since the 1972 death of J. Edgar Hoover, the man who built the bureau into one of the world's best-known police agen-

cies. That period has seen sweeping changes, Kessler writes, including drastic cutbacks in the foreign counterintelligence program, an increased emphasis on white collar and organized crime probes and the recruitment of more minority and women agents.

Kessler liberally sprinkles his text with fascinating case histories. He describes how the bureau opened a bar catering to drug-dealing motorcycle gang members. The bar not only generated evidence that led to a host of major felony convictions but also managed to turn a \$60,000 profit in the bargain.

In another case, Kessler recounts how agents traced the charred fragments of a rental van to the men accused of bombing New York's World Trade Centers. He reveals how a one-man FBI office in Cumberland, Md., helped collar a local sheriff's deputy in a complex kidnap-murder case, and how bureau agents used a cellular telephone "sting" to snare big-time drug dealers in Miami.

CISPES Probe

As to the agency's recent disasters, Kessler says one of the most troubling was the bureau's massive, misdirected probe of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. As reported by Kessler, in 1983, FBI agents in Texas initiated an investigation into baseless claims that CISPES, an organization opposed to U.S. policy in Central America, was engaged in terrorist activity.

In the course of the probe, the agents opened files on 2,375 citizens, rummaged through people's trash, checked activists' phone bills and spied on political meetings. The inquiry violated the rights of countless people, wasted

BOOKS

The FBI

By Ronald Kessler

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hundreds of thousands of tax dollars and dragged on for two years without a single criminal charge.

The book also presents a solid analysis of the agency's continuing

institutional problems, including its hero-worship for the discredited Hoover, its parochial nature and its tolerance for sloppy and incompetent work. To Kessler, the CISPES case shows that despite a series of recent reforms aimed at protecting citizens' rights, the bureau can easily be sidetracked into subverting constitutional rights.

The book contains some obvious errors. Kessler consistently misspells the late New York mob

boss Paul Castellano's name and says convicted murderer Lawrence S. Bittaker is serving a life sentence for a series of torture slayings when Bittaker is actually awaiting execution at San Quentin. But these minor inaccuracies detract little from an otherwise careful and well-written study.

Bill Wallace is on the staff of The Chronicle.