

Cover-Up

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By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, Aug. 15—"I thought you might be interested in knowing" was the bland way that the late F.B.I. Director, J. Edgar Hoover, began his notes to Presidents, as he transmitted information about public figures that might be potentially embarrassing.

Not surprisingly, some Presidents showed a keen interest in knowing a lot about men in opposing political parties, especially those who might be running for President against them.

When Mr. Hoover visited President-elect Nixon at the Pierre Hotel in New York during the 1968 interregnum, he informed the next occupant of the White House that the F.B.I. had been used by President Johnson to look into Nixon-Agnew campaign activities.

I had heard of this conversation long ago; it was recently confirmed to me by H. R. Haldeman, who had been told about it by the President. In particular, the F.B.I. was involved in the surveillance of records of calls made during the campaign of 1968 by the candidate for Vice President.

With that hearsay in mind, I wondered in a recent essay why the Senate Watergate Committee had not looked into this improper use of the F.B.I. during the Johnson Administration, when Ramsey Clark was Attorney General.

I dropped a note to Mr. Clark asking several questions, and received a prompt reply which is quoted here in part:

"Of course, I never approved any wiretapping or electronic surveillance, or any other form of investigation by the F.B.I., or any Government official, of Mr. Nixon, Mr. Agnew or anyone in their campaigns, including Anna Chennault, at any time, for any purpose. I believe you know this.

"In my judgment," Mr. Clark wrote, "the F.B.I. would never have considered such surveillance, and would never have dared ask me for approval, if it had. It was unthinkable . . .

"If such activities had occurred, Mr. Hoover would have been the first to reveal it to Mr. Nixon upon his election as President, if not before . . .

"You seem to want the American people to believe," Mr. Clark goes on, "that activities attributed to the Nixon Administration are not unusual; that everyone does it. This is simply not true. When the people share such cynicism, government will fall. . . ."

The former Attorney General's answer could not have been more forthright, and I thank him for it. But it seems that J. Edgar Hoover was pulling the wool over his eyes: never daring to ask his approval, the F.B.I. made

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sitting—covered up, if you will—in the safe of the Senate select committee in the form of memoranda supplied them by J. Dean 3d, and written by William B. Sullivan, a former assistant to the late F.B.I. director.

The Sullivan memos, according to Dan Thomasson of Scripps-Howard, contain all kinds of leads: about F.B.I. investigations ordered by Franklin D. Roosevelt into opponents of Lend-Lease; about Robert Kennedy's orders to tap the phones of suspects in the Bobby Baker case that might turn up information to embarrass Lyndon Johnson; about President Johnson's use of the F.B.I. to collect mud for slinging at Barry Goldwater, and to try to connect a New York civil rights demonstration to "some Republicans" in 1964; and about the F.B.I. surveillance of Mr. Agnew in 1968.

But the Watergate committee, shaking with moral outrage during its interrogation of Nixon appointee L. Patrick Gray, kept all this under wraps.

Minority Counsel Fred Thompson, reached by telephone today, explains: "When we got those so-called Sullivan memoranda that Dean turned over, they were not distributed as the other materials were. Some of the information contained some very serious personal allegations against some Democratic leaders, and had nothing to do with the scope of the inquiry. I did not want to see them, have not seen them, and as far as I know, they're still in the safe. However, I plan to look at them now."

Documents making scurrilous charges should not be made public, but information in them that exposes the misuse of the F.B.I.—with or without the connivance of Attorneys General—should not be suppressed.

"Everyone did it" is not an excuse for the growth of the political Big Ear, but even those victimized by eavesdroppers can object to the suppression of information about the origins of this practice by men who profess to be investigating cover-ups.

The way to end snooping is to expose it, without fear or political favor, to pull it up by the roots, no matter what history must be rewritten—and not to waggle our eyebrows and be the kind of people Isaiah condemned for saying "Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou."

As Mr. Hoover would have put it about the memoranda in the Watergate committee's safe—I think we all might be interested in knowing.

investigations they knew Mr. Clark, an outspoken civil libertarian, would have disapproved. (Mr. Clark is quite right about how "Mr. Hoover would have been the first to reveal it to Mr. Nixon upon his election," which Mr. Hoover did.)

But where is some evidence of this rumored use of the F.B.I. for political purposes?

The origins of the eavesdropping climate that led to Watergate have been