

Wash Post 12/14/83 *The Hoover File*

THERE HAVE BEEN rumors in this town ever since J. Edgar Hoover's death that he kept secret files with which he subtly blackmailed government officials. The most famous files, of course, were said to be those on President John F. Kennedy's sexual exploits. But now, thanks to a Freedom of Information request by Marquette historian Athan Theoharis and an analysis in this week's U.S. News and World Report of the files he obtained, we have a clearer picture of just how broad and how longstanding Director Hoover's special interest in political figures was.

Mr. Hoover kept personal files that were not accessible even to top bureau assistants. Their contents were so sensitive as to be handled, in the words of one official, like "three cabinets full of cancer." The analogy is apt. In the 7,000 pages released in accordance with this FOIA request—another 10,000 were retained under claim of exemption from the act—we learn that every bit of rumor, hearsay, trivia and potentially scandalous or embarrassing information about political figures was compiled and saved. This included third-hand reports about the supposed infidelities of one president's wife, accounts, both true and false, of the youthful indiscretions of prominent politicians, and what appears to be a catalogue of facts and charges that could only be useful to intimidate the subject or to titillate the collector and a few carefully chosen third parties. These vicious bits of information were often passed along, unevaluated,

to the subject with the director's sly assurance that "I know there's no truth to this. I'll never speak of it to anyone." But the message, and the implied threat, were clear. Federal officials at all levels and candidates for office were not immune.

There is also evidence that presidents misused the bureau and played upon the director's desire to be of service. Lyndon Johnson, for example, tried to intimidate journalists by having FBI agents sent to question them. Harry Truman had President Roosevelt's friends wiretapped. The evidence as a whole gives a sordid picture of highly improper interaction between political leaders and the supposedly neutral head of the nation's top law enforcement agency. It reveals a clear abuse of the power given to Mr. Hoover by the people of this country who trusted him, and, in many cases almost venerated him, for far too long.

J. Edgar Hoover ran the FBI for 48 years. Since his death in 1972, a number of men have directed that institution, some better than others. The current director, William Webster, is surely one of the best. And there is today greater public awareness of the bureau's activities, more congressional and judicial oversight and a 10-year limitation on any director's term. But to see these scurrilous old files is to remember how far the bureau has had to come—and to wonder anew how a building in this city could actually still be named for the man who ordered them up.