

"The record of the FBI on Watergate—its determination to force out the truth in such staggering contrast with the rest of the executive branch—is extraordinary."



Joseph Kraft

Post 5/31/73

The FBI and Watergate: Winning One for Hoover

The Federal Bureau of Investigation—more than the press, the courts, the Congress and all other government agencies combined—led the way in resisting and exposing what we now know as the Watergate conspiracy.

In the process, the bureau itself developed a true crisis of authority. So the FBI now affords a supreme object lesson as to the requirements for rebuilding government after Watergate.

The FBI, we now know, came into the Watergate picture back in 1970 when the White House first began calling on the various agencies of government to provide political information, by wiretap and other dubious means. The one person inside government who refused was the director of the bureau, J. Edgar Hoover.

The FBI next came into the picture immediately after the Watergate burglary of June 17, 1972. By the second week of July, an FBI team under the supervision of Charles Nuzum had developed all the information necessary to bring the men who participated in the burglary to trial. The FBI agents were confident (rightly it turned out) that under pressure of sentencing the guilty men would break and spill the beans on the higher-ups.

But the trial was delayed until after the election—apparently on orders of the prosecutors at the Justice Department. FBI agents were deterred—in part by Mr. Hoover's successor, acting director L. Patrick Gray III—from thorough questioning of the higher-

ups.

With their professional reputations on the line, FBI agents began airing their suspicions. The result was the first big set of Watergate stories before the election showing that the break-in was part of a larger campaign of sabotage involving President Nixon's closest personal and political advisers.

The FBI became more deeply embroiled after the elections when the President named Mr. Gray to be director of the bureau in his own right. That appointment offended both younger agents who believed he had queered the Watergate investigation and older officials with ambitions of their own.

The upshot was a new wave of leaks which centered around Mr. Gray and began to surface in his Senate confirmation hearings. Out of these leaks came the major evidence of the at-

tempt to cover up Watergate and the resignation of Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman from the White House staff. As part of the shakeup, Mr. Gray was replaced as acting FBI director by William Ruckelshaus, a former assistant attorney general who had made a name for himself as a tough and honorable official in the environmental field.

The record of the FBI on Watergate is so extraordinary, its determination to force out the truth in such staggering contrast with the rest of the executive branch, that it raises a question. How come? Why was the bureau so different from the CIA and the Justice Department and the staff of the National Security Council?

The answer is J. Edgar Hoover. He was, as I had occasion to write some years ago, the compleat bureaucrat. He made the FBI a supremely professional law-enforcement agency with elan, discipline and a profound sense of institutional loyalty. In the crunch, the institutional loyalty, the sense of fidelity to law enforcement, was proof against the demands of the White House. Despite the powerful pull of presidential loyalty, the bureau went out and won one for J. Edgar Hoover.

But the price paid has been very heavy. The bureau is now a hotbed of factionalism. It leaks like crazy to the press and the Congress. At least one former high FBI official, William Sullivan, was willing to play the White House game, and passed FBI documents over to the White House by back channels. More important still, in a total break with discipline, all assistant directors and all special agents in charge of FBI field offices have sent a telegram to the President insisting that he name an FBI man as the next director.

The way to save the bureau from this factional infighting is not in doubt. The necessary step is the appointment of a man who has the Hoover qualities — integrity, independence, institutional loyalty and a willingness to stand up to the high political authorities when they push him to cut corners.

It is only by bringing such men into his administration, at the FBI and other governmental agencies, that Mr. Nixon can redeem the government he and his friends have done so much to weaken at the base.

© 1973, Publishers-Hall Syndicate