

Dirty Linen: Erasing All Traces

A Commentary

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By Nicholas von Hoffman

Despite that fancy name, L. Patrick Gray III, the acting director of the FBI, looks like the guy who sits on a stool and runs the back freight elevator. He showed the same public presence, the same sharpness the other day in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee as he begged them to commit political euthanasia and put him away.

"Senator Hart," he pleaded, "I gotta be honest with you. I could sit here and chat pretty long, but there's got to be some finality. I'm entitled to some kind of a judgment."

He's not likely to get it soon. Neither Chairman Jim Eastland, who sits like a quiet, lopsided moon at the apex of the arch-shaped committee table, nor any of his colleagues appeared ready to slide the knife across the carotid artery at this amiably helpless man's neck.

More time must pass before they vote his appointment as the permanent director of the FBI up or down, but while he waits and tries in his inadequate way to answer the senators' questions, you can study him and guess why Nixon appointed him. He is the useful, unthinking servant: That's what his testimony reveals.

If they wanted him to make a campaign speech, he went and did it. If they wanted him to let them use his bureau as an adjunct to the reelection apparatus, he let 'em have it. If they said to him they'd run his investigations of their burglaries and their wiretapping and dirty tricks, he'd stay on his stool and run the elevator.

He began his testimony with the Judiciary Committee in the same compliant, accommodating way by allow-

ing the members free access to the FBI's raw information file on its investigation of the Waterbuggers. "I made an unprecedented offer," the old fellow with the crew cut told them. Indeed he had, but if it bothered him that the precedent he'd set is one that may ruin reputations in the future, he didn't say it.

By making the pages of unrebutted hearsay and gossip that the FBI collects available in this public way he's shaken a nation's privacy. In some dim way he recognized that, complaining, "I've made it difficult for the FBI to receive information from sources in the future."

He certainly has—if anything you may tell an FBI agent is subject to come rolling out of the mouth of a politician the next day. But, strangely, these politicians didn't avail themselves of this offer. The guys that are going to vote for him had no motive to go looking in the files to verify how the FBI had been used to hide

of Tattletale Gray

culprits instead of discovering them. But the Democrats, the liberals, the guys lined up against him—Tunney of California excepted—didn't bestir themselves to go through the documentation. As so often happens with senatorial liberals, they came unprepared and so unfamiliar with the subject matter they couldn't ask him the killing questions.

It was the White House that shut Gray up and locked the files, not out of any regard for civil liberties, but because too much stuff leaking out was inculcating Nixon's nearest people. He was sent back up to the Judiciary Committee to repeat endlessly that he "respectfully declines to answer" and to say in a voice that asked for pity, "I'm the fella that's carrying the hod."

He had, it seemed, been used and dumped by the man who appointed him. So, silenced and forbidden to answer any questions of substance, he'd returned to the com-

Poster

mittee where they'd yet managed to get enough out of him to provide us with a hint of what may have been transpiring with the FBI and the White House as the Watergate scandals have grown larger and more public.

Picture the FBI dredging up more and more information compromising the President's most intimate assistants despite the word having been passed they weren't to find anything. Trained at it is, the FBI could *not* find anything. The damning information piled up and up until it leaked, not only to the White House staff, which was fine with Gray, but to the press, and each time it did Gray got called up and reamed out.

Fifteen times at least he was called on the carpet for the stories that were leaking out of the FBI. While Ziegler was railing at the press for printing stories about the repacious lawlessness of many of his own colleagues, Gray's FBI was providing the information, and he couldn't caulk the holes. If the Bureau had been a rowboat, it couldn't have gotten you across a guppy pond.

Nor could they call the investigation off. There had to be an investigation, if they were going to have a false exoneration of the Nixon people, but the Bureau was out of control. The old pro-Hoover people and the new anti-Gray people inside the FBI had learned the political uses of information from the compliant elevator operator who'd been set in charge of them.

But grateful as we may be that these tales of high-level dishonesty have come out, the way a politicized FBI let 'em out is scary enough to make us old-time J. Edgar Hoover haters wish he were still around. J. Edgar rode the front elevator and the man he had drive it for him kept his mouth shut.