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FBI Can Conquer Confidence Crisis, Ruckelshaus Says

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William D. Ruckelshaus, acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, acknowledged yesterday that the FBI is facing a crisis of confidence, but he insisted that revelations concerning the Watergate affair have caused "no permanent damage" to the bureau.

Despite low morale arising out of the alleged politicization of the FBI during the leadership of his predecessor, L. Patrick Gray III, Ruckelshaus said, the bureau's "work in the field is being done well."

"The problems that exist," Ruckelshaus said in an interview in his office at FBI headquarters, "will evaporate once a good strong man is in place" as the agency's director and bureau professionals are persuaded that they have "permanent leadership."

As he has done several times since taking office after Gray resigned under fire on April 26, Ruckelshaus quickly disqualified himself from consideration for the position.

"I don't want to stay," he said. "This has nothing to do with my respect for the institution . . . I just feel that no one with a political background should be in this job."

The ultimate choice must be up to President Nixon, Ruckelshaus insisted, but he expressed his hope that a "career man" within the FBI will be given "a fair shot" at the directorship.

In the meantime, Ruckelshaus said, he is interviewing only long-time bureau employees as possible replacements for W. Mark Felt, a career man who is now the FBI's acting associate director but will retire in mid-June.

Ruckelshaus will apparently name a successor to Felt shortly before his own two-month stint as acting FBI director expires.

Saying it would be "presumptuous" to do otherwise, Ruckelshaus declined to evaluate the performance of either Gray or J. Edgar Hoover, who died in May, 1972, after serving for nearly half a century as head of the bureau.

But he said that most FBI

professionals, unlike some who left its service during his last years, feel that Hoover "remained effective until his death."

Ruckelshaus also asserted that Hoover's decision to suspend FBI liaison with other federal agencies—included among President Nixon's criticisms last week of the late director—was "a very complicated story."

There are many ways, he said, of establishing "effective communication" among intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

"People here (at the FBI) think it was fine" for Hoover to break off liaison, Ruckelshaus pointed out, "and so do some in other agencies. But what went on at the top, there is no way of knowing."

Ruckelshaus refused to discuss the FBI's conduct of the original Watergate investigation under Gray's leadership, citing the recent order by special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox that all Justice Department officials maintain silence on matters under his jurisdiction.

He said that he and Cox are now "attempting to formalize a procedure for the relationship" between the bureau and the special prosecutor's office. That procedure will apparently authorize the FBI to circumvent the usual Justice Department channels and report directly to Cox.

Cox "is the Attorney General for Watergate," he pointed out.

One of the most significant recent blows to the FBI's reputation, Ruckelshaus observed, was the discovery that the tapes and logs of "national security" wiretaps conducted between

1969 and 1971 were missing from bureau files.

The FBI's inability to find those records promptly was one of the major reasons cited by U.S. District Court Judge W. Matt Byrne Jr. in Los Angeles for dismissal of all charges against Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony J. Russo Jr. in the Pentagon Papers trial.

Almost a year after the Justice Department had denied any electronic surveillance of Ellsberg and Russo, it was revealed that Ellsberg had been overheard during a "national security" wiretap on the Bethesda home of Morton H. Halperin, who was a National Security Council consultant.

Ruckelshaus said it would be understandable if, as a result of those developments, federal courts were now skeptical about the Justice Department's and the FBI's good-faith compliance with pretrial orders concerning wiretapping.

But he insisted that the bureau's electronic surveillance index is now comprehensive and includes all wiretaps over the past 30 years.

The FBI will now "make very sure that (its) records are kept carefully," Ruckelshaus said, adding that "I am confident that we can provide the required information" in court cases.

Ruckelshaus said that the FBI now maintains 108 electronic surveillances, about the same number as when he became acting director.