

A fairly stiff exchange between Attorney General William B. Saxbe and Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Clarence M. Kelley a few days ago demonstrated that the ghost of J. Edgar Hoover had not yet been completely exorcised from the halls of justice in Washington, D. C. The disagreement between the two officials surfaced when they commented on a report prepared jointly by the F.B.I. and the Department of Justice on a counter-intelligence program which the F.B.I. conducted from 1956 to 1971.

Originally directed at the Communist party of the United States, the program, dubbed Cointelpro, was ultimately expanded so that groups on the left and on the right were targeted together with a number of civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Congress of Racial Equality. The object of Cointelpro was disruption of the groups. Among the methods used was the planting of false information within the group or with friendly news organization employes, making economic trouble for members of such groups by contacting employers or credit rating companies and creating the suspicion that bona fide members of some of the groups were police spies.

The joint Justice-F.B.I. report said that some of the practices described could "only be considered abhorrent in a free society." Mr. Saxbe has already said that he and his successors had to assert firm authority over the F.B.I. in order to prevent a recurrence of anything like the Cointelpro operation.

Mr. Kelley, in contrast, argues that the counter-intelligence activities "helped bring about a favorable change." He also asserts that a failure to disrupt "violence-prone groups" would have been an evasion of the F.B.I.'s responsibilities. Mr. Kelley's approach recalls that of the late J. Edgar Hoover, who thought that it was his, rather than Congress's, responsibility to determine what the ambit of the F.B.I.'s authority ought to be. There is no statute authorizing the bureau to subvert whatever private group of American citizens the director of the F.B.I. deems to be dangerous to the country.

The Attorney General is quite correct in this discussion, we believe, particularly as to the need for the Attorney General to maintain a firm continuing rein on the F.B.I.