

J. Edgar's gossip hot line with Oval Office connections

By Jim Squires
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — They went to the Oval Office under J. Edgar Hoover's familiar "I thought you might be interested in knowing" heading. And what followed was almost always "interesting" to say the least.

From the files of one of the most proficient information-gathering machines in existence — the Federal Bureau of Investigation — J. Edgar Hoover spun stilted but explicit tales of human weakness in high places — illicit sex, drunkenness, homosexuality, marital problems.

It was a common practice. If any President who received such information — and all are said to have — ever rebuked Hoover for his efforts, it remained as secret as the contents of the memos themselves. Most were dutifully grateful.

Most old FBI hands say Hoover began compiling information on public figures, including congressmen, very early in his 30-year reign. By the early 1950s field agents were under a standing directive to forward biographical information on newly-elected congressmen or executive branch appointees to Washington for the benefit of bureau officials who had to deal with them.

As far as it is known, there never were any specific orders, official or unofficial, for FBI agents to solicit information of an intimate personal nature beyond the scope of "biographical data."

But as one former assistant director of the agency recalled last week, "It was understood that Hoover was interested in such material. Some agents who might come across a little smut in the course of an investigation would simply ignore it and not forward it. But others saw it as a chance to gain favor and deliberately went out of their way to get more."

"I can't really say how

much of the information ever was used," said one former high-ranking bureau official. "But I am convinced that many a politician shied away from confrontations with the director because he did not know what Hoover had on him."

The forthcoming congressional investigations may not verify the existence of secret files or dossiers of personal information on public figures. The official bureau position is that the information is stored in bits and pieces and was only pulled together when needed.

But there are witnesses who can swear that such dossiers existed, perhaps in Hoover's personal files which have either been destroyed or removed from the bureau. And they were readily accessible to presidents.

"I have personally carried files to the White House dozens of times and delivered them to a secretary," said a former FBI-White House liaison during the Johnson Administration. "That way the President could truthfully say he had never talked to the FBI on a particular matter."

While the ultimate abuse of the FBI occurred under Nixon, most present and former FBI officials say Johnson, who had a private

phone line to the home of assistant director Cartha D. DeLoach, did not hesitate to use Hoover's bureau for political purposes.

For example, Johnson requested complete bureau investigations of both Sen. Barry Goldwater, his 1964 presidential opponent and of Spiro Agnew, after he became Vice President-elect in 1968.

Johnson justified the Goldwater request, one ex-FBI official reported, by pointing out that Goldwater was a reserve major general in the Air Force and "had more secrets than we do at the White House."

More than one President, FBI officials agree, used the agency to gather information on personal enemies, in-



FBI's J. Edgar Hoover

Presidents got
spicy items on
many in high
places - and
sometimes
used them

no such file existed.

That the agency had gathered and maintained such files never was publicly acknowledged until 1973, after Hoover's death, when the Senate was considering the appointment of L. Patrick Gray as his successor.

Then acting director, Gray, told the Senate Judiciary Committee he had seen files so hot there was no way of destroying them without risking hurt to some subjects. Saying he would like to burn them, Gray said the law gives the National Archives final say over the documents.

cluding elected officials. Roosevelt for instance loosed the FBI on foes of his lendlease program. And Johnson frequently passed the information along to his allies on The Hill who could stun a Johnson opponent by casually dropping a juicy tidbit of gossip from his FBI file.

Although never documented it was widely known and believed in Washington that Johnson often amused himself with bedside reading of what J. Edgar was finding out about others.

House Speaker Carl Albert, who like everyone else heard rumors that the FBI had a thick file on his personal life, wrote Hoover and asked him about it. Hoover responded equivocally that

"I would go through Archives but I don't want anyone, not even an archivist to read some of the rot in some of these files," he testified. Subsequent news stories disclosed the existence of files on Sen. Edward Kennedy, then House majority leader Hale Boggs, and several others.

Still there was little protest. No one demanded an investigation. And the only explanations are that the threat of Hoover had outlived him, or that the nation was far less sensitive to the abuse of police power.

Perhaps more telling is that the post-Watergate mentality, a sort of righteous indignation at the slightest provocation, had yet to take shape.