

# The Bureau and the bureaus

## PART I:

### The press barely laid a hand on Hoover

BY PAUL CLANCY

**I**N FEBRUARY, 1971, the Federal Bureau of Investigation fed a story to the San Francisco *Examiner* that former Black Panther Huey Newton was living in a lavish \$650-a-month apartment in Oakland under an assumed name and that he was receiving a daily delivery of fresh flowers. The *Examiner* promptly ran an exclusive front-page article with pictures of Newton leaving the apartment.

The San Francisco office of the FBI sent an urgent telegram to Washington headquarters the same day, announcing the successful maneuver and requesting authority to anonymously

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mail photocopies of the article to all Black Panther chapters, other Panthers who might not have read the article, supporters, "individuals who investigation in the future might reveal their support of BPP, . . . to Eldridge Cleaver in Algiers and to known supporters in Europe" and, finally, to editors. The photocopies would be accompanied by the motto "Live Like Huey."

An "informative note" from the FBI's Domestic Intelligence Division says this mass mailing would have the desirable effect of "discrediting Newton in the eyes of his supporters." Permission quickly was granted and this neat little Mass Media Program, a favorite part of COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program), was carried out as planned. The setup and follow-through were easy;



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the FBI had done it so often. And it worked.

As evidence of the misdeeds of the Hoover era at the FBI continues to grow, the pangs of conscience are being experienced not only by those who performed them but by those who watched and did not see. The tough, incorruptible image of J. Edgar Hoover was pieced together during his near half-century as director by a believing, eager and sometimes frightened press. It was an image out of the childhood of nearly every reporter who wrote a line about the FBI, an image of the G-man fighting fearlessly to shield the innocent.

It has now become the unpleasant task of the media to dismantle that image and, in the process, examine their own role. If what was happening was a conspiracy against American constitutional principles, was the press a co-conspirator?

Reporters and federal investigators have had a close and mutually profitable relationship for decades, both groups striving basically for the same goal — information and the public good. Somewhere along the way the FBI came to the decision to take advantage of that relationship, and certain segments of the press, whether wittingly or unwittingly, were had. So was the American public.

Most chilling of all is the realization that the press played a key role in the Bureau's now infamous counterintelligence programs.

#### Sharing the Glory

Although it was apparent rather early that Hoover had a thin-skinned, autocratic and petty side, the press, until recent years, hardly laid a glove on him. One exception was syndicated columnist Drew Pearson who, a check of his files shows, began in 1933 to write that Hoover had shrouded himself in secrecy, was petty toward underlings and upstaged nearly everyone else in the law enforcement com-

munity for headlines. But even Pearson seasoned his criticism with frequent glowing praise.

Most newspapers lionized J. Edgar Hoover. He was the White Knight, the pugnacious dragon-slayer, the idol of school children.

Most reporters and most of the organizations they worked for would not think of tarnishing that image. Their ability to get information about crime and corruption, Communists and subversives would have been seriously jeopardized by such an ill-advised venture.

A generation of Washington reporters made their reputations by staying on the good side of J. Edgar Hoover. Hungering for the scoop that would regularly put them out front, many succumbed to the temptation to help the Bureau put its best foot forward. They would write their pieces about the courageous feats of the Bureau, go in for their interviews (more precisely Hoover monologues) and, generally, share in the glory that was the FBI's.

Walter Trohan, for 30 years reporter and Washington bureau chief for the *Chicago Tribune*, says in “Political Animals,” his recent book, “Few reporters have been closer to the FBI or its chief, J. Edgar Hoover, than I was.” He listed Cartha (Deke) DeLoach, head of the Crime Records Division, and DeLoach's predecessor, Louis Nichols, among his closest friends. Among other things, they helped him tell a Communist from a nonCommunist.

But not only were close relationships with the Bureau good for a scoop. Such contacts were priceless. The FBI and the CIA held the extraordinary power to establish or destroy the careers of investigative reporters who were only as good as their sources.

Big city papers in tough competitive situations and the wire services literally scrambled for favors from the Bureau. They swallowed every

new lead from official sources, and raced to the phones with every revision to the 10 Most Wanted List.

But reporters, the newspapers or news services were not the only ones to benefit from the cozy relationship. The FBI saw it had, in the press, a comrade in arms.

“Sirs,” began an Oct. 28, 1968 letter to *Life* magazine. “Your recent issue [October 4th], which devoted three pages to the aggrandizement of underground editor (?) Paul Krassner, was too, too much. You must be hard up for material. Am I asking the impossible by requesting that Krassner and his ilk be left in the sewers where they belong?” The letter, signed by “Howard Rasmussen, Brooklyn College School of General Studies,” was in fact penned by the FBI's New York office and cleared through Washington.

One of the legacies from reporter Trohan's era in the now vastly changed *Chicago Tribune* bureau is a memo to one of his editors. Dated Oct. 12, 1962, and now framed in the office, it reads: “The following material is sent with the suggestion you might do something to discredit this commy [sic] in the eyes of the party. You can guess the source.” The suggested news copy, which accompanied the memo, described “Chicago's top commie” as having recently “abandoned his Loop headquarters to return to his former South Side haunts. . . . He's giving some of the playboys on Chicago's West Side a real run for their money. Wonder if the commies have deserted the workers for the ‘smart set’ who play (not work) at some of the city's best known spots.”

It took only three days for the “suggestion” to be carried out. The story, written by then *Tribune* reporter Sandy Smith, said the recent behavior of this “pub crawling” figure “had serious-minded Communists in a tizzy yesterday.” According to the *Tribune* story, “The



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Red network was jangling with reports that this FBI target “had forsaken the austere life the Communist Party demands of its officials,” that he had deserted the working classes for the “smart tavern set” and, furthermore, had emerged as “the first Communist playboy.”

#### The Inside Story

The FBI field offices were rated on their ability to come up with counterintelligence suggestions. The suggestions were sent to William C. Sullivan, chief of the FBI’s Domestic Intelligence Division, then forwarded to Hoover. On they went through the hierarchy until they arrived at the desk of DeLoach with the recommendation that the items “may be considered for release to a cooperative news media source.”

DeLoach, as head of the Crime Records Division, the Bureau’s all-purpose public relations shop, was “the kiss of life” for reporters and many owed their reputations to his generosity. Innumerable times, when newsmen desperately needed to get inside a story, DeLoach would discreetly oblige, leaving them alone with internal FBI files. Or, he’d provide a chance for an inside story, as he did with Jeremiah O’Leary of the *Washington Star*. DeLoach called O’Leary at 6 on the morning that James Earl Ray was apprehended in London, letting the reporter in on the dramatic moments when confirmation of Ray’s identity came through. An Irish Catholic who grew up in a Washington neighborhood that produced many FBI agents, O’Leary acknowledges that he was a favorite Bureau contact. “That doesn’t mean you’re a patsy,” he says. “You get to know them and they trust you. In light of events, ‘favorite’ sounds like a bad word. But I wouldn’t do it any differently.”

Although misuse of the media was common, it was not always

successful. In 1963, a high FBI official approached a Washington reporter with a collection of letterheads purporting to prove that a former big city police commissioner, a rival of Hoover’s, had once had flirted with alleged Communist front groups. The man was a candidate for a federal judgeship and Hoover was trying to sabotage the nomination. The reporter turned it down. “It was more than I could stomach,” he says. Even so, he refuses to disclose the identity of the FBI official or even allow his own name to be used because his sources were well known.

Few Washington reporters suspected what was going on — or if they did they kept it to themselves. Some knew very well that the Bureau was up to some questionable and downright unsavory activities.

Certainly the nastiest of these was the campaign to undercut and destroy Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The centerpiece of this project was a tape recording supposedly documenting King’s sexual exploits. Actually, the doctored tape did no such thing. But the tape was either played or a transcript of it read with great moral righteousness to numerous reporters and editors. A massive whispering campaign by the FBI took place at the same time, both in Washington and out in the field. Still other so-called evidence was presented to the media around the country.

It isn’t surprising that this campaign failed miserably. No reporter or editor in his right mind would have touched such damaging and downright libelous material. What is amazing is that this crass attempt by the nation’s top law enforcement agency to smear a respected national leader was not reported for more than a decade.

King and Hoover had, during the height of the civil rights struggle, what appeared to be a minor feud. It flared into a brief bout of name-calling that was quickly followed, on





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Dec. 1, 1964, by a public reconciliation. The two met in Hoover’s office for more than an hour and it seemed that the feud was over. In reality it had just begun.

Indeed, while that very meeting was taking place, James McCartney, then a reporter for the *Chicago Daily News* (now on the national staff of Knight Newspapers), wandered across the hall to the Crime Records Division and was immediately offered evidence believed damaging to King’s reputation. A junior official of the division showed him photographs of King leaving a motel with a white woman and implied that he had been having sexual relations with her. One source familiar with that story says the woman was later identified as a paid police informant.

The material was shown to McCartney as if it had fallen innocently into the FBI’s hands, “but in the interest of truth and justice they would cooperate with me in getting the story into print,” McCartney says. The angle which the Bureau pressed on the reporter was that King, who went about masking as a great moral leader, was in fact living a life of sin. “If I wanted to get into the whole story of Martin Luther King’s private sex life, while he was posing as a highly moral civil rights leader, they would give me the information. But in no way could the FBI be identified as the source.” McCartney rejected it.

It was sometime later that David Kraslow of the *Los Angeles Times* (now bureau chief for Cox Newspapers), among others, received a call from a close source at the Bureau who said he had a transcript of a very interesting tape. The source, with whom Kraslow had freely shared information in the past, began reading from the transcript supposedly placing King in the midst of a sex orgy. Kraslow cut him off.

At about the same time, Eugene C. Patterson, editor of the *Atlanta*

*Constitution*, was approached in his office by an agent from the FBI’s Atlanta office. Up until then, relations between the newspaper and the Bureau had been extremely close, probably too close from a press point of view. But in the interest of preventing bloodshed in the South, the *Constitution* and the FBI frequently traded information.

Says Patterson, now editor of the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*, “he told me, in effect, that he was coming to the *Constitution* because we had been great defenders of Martin Luther King and had been holding him up as a moral man and a Christian leader. He said therefore he felt we ought to know that in his private life King was engaged in sexual peccadillos and that they could document this for me on the basis of their informant.” (Their “informant” being a wiretap or bug.)

The agent suggested the paper send a reporter and photographer to a Florida airport the following weekend to catch King leaving for the weekend with a girlfriend. The agent was quite angry, Patterson recalls, when he was shown the door. He came back a few days later for another try. On his third and final contact with the editor, the agent telephoned to say that the latest word from the informant was that the trip had been called off.

#### Why the Long Silence

It was difficult for any newspaper to expose the FBI’s blatant attempt to smear King. Some way would have had to be found to tell the story without actually saying what it was the FBI was peddling. But many who either heard about the Bureau’s dirty tricks — the story was all over Washington — or were actually importuned by the FBI regret that they did not try.

To be sure, the campaign was viewed with a certain degree of repugnance, but the FBI got away with it.

Some reporters say they realized at the time that their earlier acceptance of information from the FBI left them in the Bureau’s debt. Kraslow, for one, says, “Subconsciously I knew that if I did this I was going to pay one hell of a price as far as my effectiveness as an investigative reporter was concerned.”

It is easy to say that most investigative reporters today would gladly pay the price. Or would they? Would they burn their sources, risk the wrath of a man like Hoover and, most unsettling of all, face the possibility of being left on that limb all alone?

“I didn’t do my job,” Kraslow laments. “I should have blown the thing sky high, but I didn’t. I chickened.” There were other reasons: “King was alive; he had a wife and kids. There was a question first of whether you could get it in the paper; and second, if you did, would this be doing King a favor? The real point in terms of my own conscience — and that’s the thing I gotta live with — is that I didn’t try; I didn’t really go after it.”

McCartney’s reasons for not blowing the whistle on the FBI’s dirty campaign were practical. “It was my belief that, whether accurate or not, the FBI had attained the status of sacred cow, not only with the organization I worked for but the press in general. If I had seriously proposed exposing the FBI, it wouldn’t have stood a chance of getting into print. It was impossible for me to conceive that the *Chicago Daily News* was willing to print an expose that the FBI was a rotten organization.” That view held true for nearly every other newspaper in the nation.

There was one other sacred cow the press didn’t pursue — the FBI’s practice of snooping into the private affairs of members of Congress and passing this information along to President Lyndon Johnson. Many reporters had heard about it. “I



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suspicion a lot of things,” says Clark Mollenhoff of the *Des Moines Register*. “I suspicion a lot of things about a lot of people but don’t have enough hours in the day to run down all of them.” He had other reasons for not taking apart the Bureau. “They had you. Your own editors wouldn’t believe you. The FBI could get together with the cops and frame you. Besides, there was so damn much stuff to work on I didn’t have time to spend on stuff like that. Documenting FBI crimes was a goddamn tough racket. What could I prove?”

#### Crime-Fighter Facade

The attempt to sabotage King was almost a Bureau-wide pre-occupation. But the man who was in charge of media leaks in those days, Cartha DeLoach, says the suggestion that he participated in any such thing “is a complete; damn lie.” According to his recollection: “A member of the Domestic Intelligence Division brought one of those tapes to my office and played it for five or ten minutes. It was so garbled and distorted that you couldn’t understand it. I told him to cut it off. They were never in my possession. I never played them for any newspaperman.”

The overriding task of the Crime Records Division was to polish the image of the FBI and the director. Those reporters and news organizations which failed to cooperate in this effort quickly found themselves out in the cold. The FBI had until 1972 a “not to contact list” of 332 individuals “whose statements or attitudes generally when contacted on official business gave rise to doubts as to the advisability of contacting them again.” By this time, the list included many former friends of the FBI. Top-level Bureau officials adopted a policy in 1971 — outlined in a memo — that “there should be absolutely no conversations with or answers of any sort” to anyone from the Wash-



ington *Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, CBS or NBC. It is something of a miracle that this list was held to five, because, as one former Hoover aide put it, “If the FBI had followed Mr. Hoover’s instructions explicitly not to deal with the newspapers that he was mad at from time to time, there’s not a newspaper in the United States that the FBI would have dealt with.”

King was a favorite target of the FBI’s Mass Media Program, particularly his 1968 Washington Spring Project. Right-wing columnists were fed a steady stream of vituperation against the long March to Washington. When King appealed for donations to help feed and clothe the marchers, the Bureau put out the story that since Washington-area churches had offered to help, he didn’t really need the money. “An embarrassment of

riches had befallen King who will only use the money for other purposes,” declared the flack-written copy.

After King’s death, the FBI continued to try, through the media, to hamper the march. It suggested that Communists had taken an interest in the march, that teenagers and toughs were participating, that white groups were trying to run the show and that, even though it was a poor people’s campaign, it was spending a great deal of money on cars and buses.

There were later attempts to drive a wedge between the black militants and the New Left and to churn up dissent among blacks. Stokely Carmichael’s criticism of the Black Panther Party was seized on as a golden opportunity. An April 15, 1970, memo suggests that publication of Carmichael’s attack would be useful “in generating additional mutual animosity between him and the Panthers, to the benefit of the Bureau.”

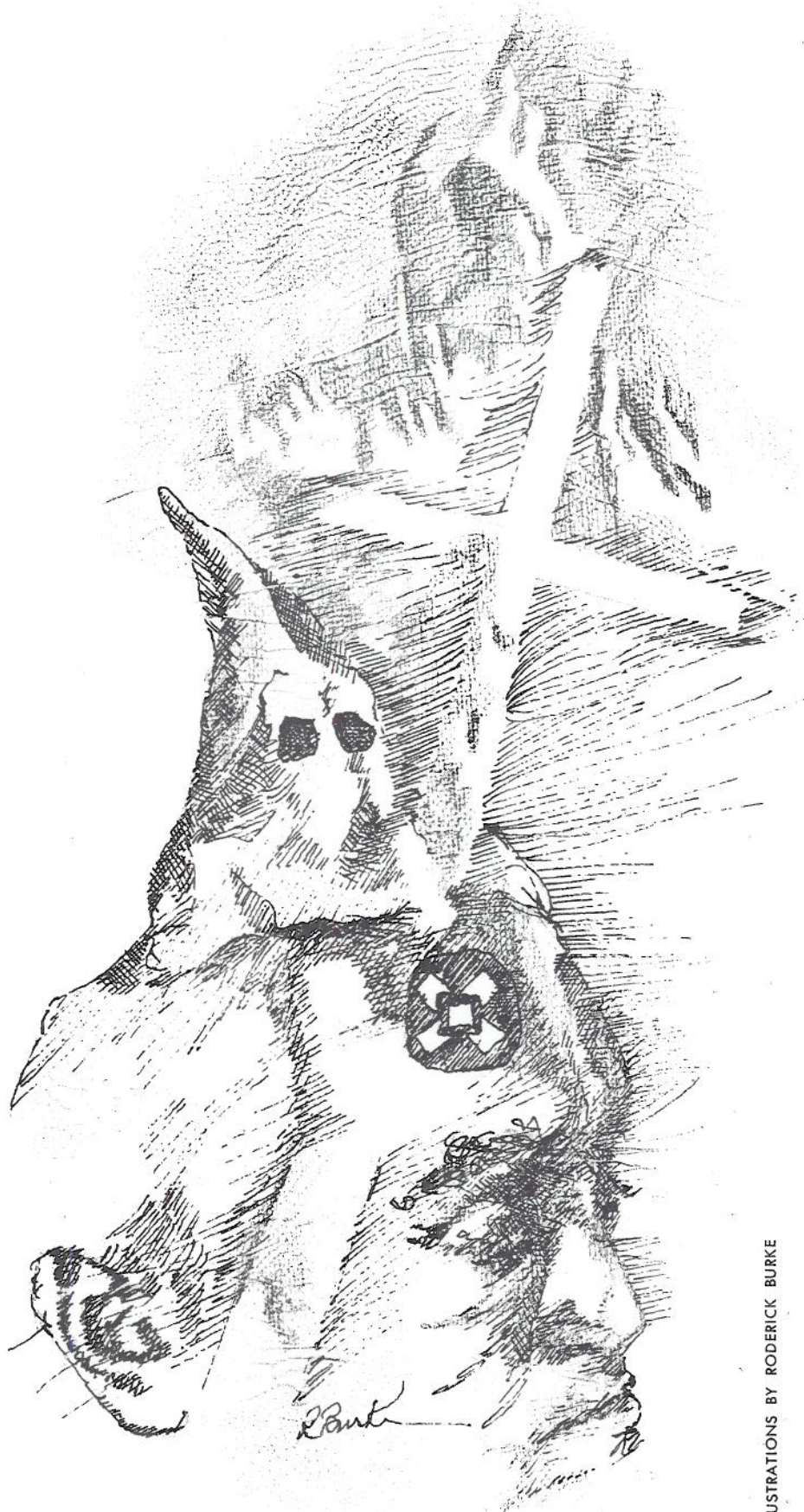
Television stations, too, looked good when they received the information they needed for exposes. So proud was one Florida station of its four-part series on the Nation of Islam that, unaware its crack reporter had been set up and fed by the Bureau, it invited FBI agents to preview the programs. They thought the programs just right. So did Hoover, who wrote “Excellent” at the bottom of the report.

#### Relations Down South

Name your poison. The Bureau had it. But there was more to the FBI during the past decade than political sabotage.

Few media-source relationships have been stronger than those between reporters and FBI agents during the tense and dangerous years of civil rights change in the South. And the relationship between the two was probably vital to the way the system operated. The first thing a reporter did upon





ILLUSTRATIONS BY RODERICK BURKE

arriving in a troubled southern town — after he made sure he wasn't being followed — was to find out where the "feds" were — the Civil Rights Division, the Community Relations Division and the Bureau. The reporter stayed close to them and even tried, for protection's sake, to look like them. Wearing a coat and tie during a march up Main Street or a cross-burning in some lonely cow pasture gave a certain sense of security. While the FBI had its shortcomings in the South, it was still looked up to as a symbol of justice. Reporters who were there felt that way. Whether agents and reporters met in an agent's car late at night or in his motel room, the exchange of information was open and vital.

"I would not hesitate to tell an agent that three metro policemen with their badges covered up were kicking the hell out of some guy in the street," says the *Chicago Tribune's* Jim Squires, then a reporter for the *Nashville Tennessean*. "If I knew who they were or could identify them from pictures, I would tell them." Says another former *Tennessean* reporter, Bill Kovach: "God, I can't tell you how many times the SAC [special agent in charge] would call up and say, 'I saw your story today. Can you tell me any more about it? Was there anything else you couldn't publish?'" Kovach, now *Washington Times* editor for the *New York Times*, gave freely. "I can't think of a time when I questioned that relationship in a fundamental way. The presumption was that if anybody was going to help, it was the federal government."

The southern reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, Jack Nelson, was the scourge of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1960s mainly because he had "fantastic" sources in the FBI. Nelson, who once applied for a job as an FBI agent, had had nearly reverential respect for the Bureau. He used the Bureau and the Bureau used him. But openly. When the FBI went down to Mississippi to solve the murders of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Miss., it opened up with psychological warfare against the Klan. It



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would assist Nelson with information about Klan activities and then circulate his published stories around the state so that the Klan would know the heat was on.

Nelson knew that agents were “jumping out of the bushes at them; I knew they were going to see their [the Klansmen's] employers and making them lose their jobs.” But he rationalizes: “I knew the Klan was evil; I knew the Klan was murderous — and I didn't think there was anything wrong with what the FBI was doing.”

Another example of dirty-tricks-on-bad-guys: the FBI tipped off reporters that a Florida Klansman, out on bail pending appeal on weapons possession, was planning to attend a rally. The FBI then sent the next day's newspaper clippings to the appellate judge. That was the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) all the way, and acceptable then.

#### The Falling Out

Nelson's first major falling out with the FBI occurred in early 1970 when he reported that the Bureau paid informants to arrange a trap for the Klan in Meridian, Miss., then killed one of them in a shoot-out. Nelson's articles raised serious questions about the Bureau's methods and earned for him the grave displeasure of its Washington image-keepers.

The Bureau countered by setting history straight. A memo by Ken Dean of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations says that an FBI official told him not to worry about the Nelson disclosures, “that the FBI had contacted Don Whitehead, a writer who was favorable toward the FBI. He said that Whitehead had agreed to do a story for the *Reader's Digest* and to write a book about the Meridian situation.” It would be, the official assured Dean, “written from our files.” The book did not mention the payoff to the Meridian informants or their trap.

(This author's efforts to reach Whitehead for comment were unsuccessful.)

Nelson arrived in Washington and began asking abrasive questions about the Bureau and Hoover. The Bureau responded by doing a background check on Nelson and by cutting the *Times* out of major stories. When David Kraslow, bureau chief of the *Times*, complained to Crime Records Division chief Thomas Bishop, the latter is reported to have told him, “When you get rid of that son-of-a-bitch with a vendetta against the FBI, we'll cooperate with you.”

When that didn't work, Hoover himself tried to get Nelson fired. First, he arranged a long meeting with the *Times's* vice president and general manager, Robert D. Nelson (no relation), and, on Oct. 13, 1971, delivered a personal tirade to a stunned Kraslow. Reading rapidly — and at times almost incoherently — from FBI documents, according to Kraslow, Hoover tore into Nelson for the better part of an hour and 40 minutes. He went through a list of *Times* stories written by Nelson and Ronald J. Ostrow about the Bureau and then went in for the kill. He charged that Nelson was an excessive drinker, a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality who had often bragged that he was assigned to the *Times's* Washington bureau to “get” Hoover.

Hoover read from a memorandum he had sent to Atty. Gen. John Mitchell complaining that, “The Los Angeles *Times's* campaign against the FBI and me is being spearheaded by reporter Jack Nelson. I have been informed on four distinct occasions that Nelson has been given this assignment of ‘getting’ me, and I have also been informed that he was assigned to the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles *Times* for this specific purpose.” Hoover said Nelson told others “that he had a statement from someone in the department alleging that I am a homosexual — which in-

formation Nelson said he planned to include in an article.” These excerpts were included in the FBI's file on Nelson, part of which Nelson has obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

Kraslow, who had at one time stood in awe of Hoover, was dumbstruck. “It seemed to me that he was not in full possession of his faculties. His behavior was not that of a man who was in total control. He rambled, he got his facts screwed up — he frequently referred to Jack Nelson as Jack Anderson — he kept repeating things, kept losing track of sentences.”

Hoover seemed cocky at first, as though “he had Jack Nelson on the ropes and that Jack Nelson was on his way to getting his ass fired.” But Kraslow, not suspecting that he was himself the subject of an FBI file for stories he had written about FBI eavesdropping, kept asking for proof. Hoover refused to let Kraslow see the documents he was reading from. “All I can tell you,” Kraslow quotes him as saying, “is if we believe it, it's true. It's here in the files.”

#### The Better the Image

Six months later, Hoover died in his sleep. However, the myth of his infallibility would linger a bit longer.

Ironically, the FBI, which had so misused its trust with reporters, apparently cooperated in one of the greatest press investigations in history, the unraveling of the Watergate crimes. In so doing, it ultimately exposed itself to inquiry and change.

The new FBI under Clarence Kelly appears the model of openness and integrity. It has rolled out the carpet for reporters and even invited them to criticize its policies. But disillusionment is a scarring experience, and skepticism, on the part of the press and public alike, dies hard. ■

(Next: *The new FBI and the lingering spirit of J. Edgar Hoover.*)