

An apology from the FBI

Examiner News Services

WASHINGTON — FBI Director Clarence Kelley issued his first public apology yesterday for FBI misdeeds under J. Edgar Hoover.

"We are truly sorry we were responsible for instances which now are subject to such criticism," Kelley said of Hoover's once-secret effort to watch, harass and discredit thousands of Americans whose politics he opposed.

"Some of those activities were clearly wrong and quite indefensible. We most certainly must never allow them to be repeated."

His apology came in the text of a lecture at Westminster College at Fulton, Mo., where commencement speaker Winston Churchill said in 1947 that "an iron curtain has descended" across Central Europe.

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Kelley used his subject, the responsibilities of power, to discuss the issue of COINTELPRO — the "counter-intelligence program" of dirty tricks against U.S. dissidents from the late 1950s to the early 1970s.

"Power abuses perhaps can be explained and possibly even be excused," he said, "but only when the explanation is truthful, contrite and is accompanied by a well defined plan to prevent a recurrence.

"It will avail the FBI or the people we serve nothing if we lash back at our critics."

Kelley had been reluctant to renounce any part of the FBI's past because of the impact such an apology could have on the bureau's morale. Many career FBI officials opposed any statement of contrition.

Kelley's speech came as the Senate Intelligence Committee continued issuing reports detailing the extent of improper FBI conduct, primarily in the methods of gathering intelligence about domestic political organizations.

Perhaps Kelley's most difficult personal decision was to place the blame on Hoover, whom he deeply admired.

"Many of the activities being condemned were, considering the times in which they occurred — the violent '60s — good-faith efforts to prevent bloodshed and wanton destruction of property," Kelley said.

"Nevertheless, there were wrongful uses of power."

He softened this by saying the abuses "occurred chiefly during the twilight of Mr. Hoover's administration."

Before that, he said Hoover built the bureau into an admired institution "through genuine investigative successes.

"But around these successes," he said, "was built an almost superhuman image — an image greatly influenced by the news media."

He said a New York newspaper proclaimed Hoover "Public Hero No. 1" in the gangbusters era of 1938 and this image was "enthusiastically abetted by the news media, willingly indulged by Congress and warmly embraced by a grateful public."

"We do not hold that the FBI is the last and only bulwark of democracy," Kelley said, "but we do believe liberty will lose an effective and diligent defender if the FBI is destroyed."