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J. Edgar Hoover's Public Relations



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WASHINGTON IS A CITY of cynicism and gossip, and the oldest myth in town is that J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI always get what they want not because they are adept at nabbing crooks but because their raw files contain the goods on every politician and bureaucrat.

Hoover and his boys usually do get what they want, but it is probably because Hoover was a genius of public relations who built for his agency a reputation—much of it deserved—that amounted almost to infallibility.

But Hoover, now 70, has been caught recently with his press releases down.

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FIRST, HE CALLED The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. "the most notorious liar in the country." Only King's worst enemies regarded that as anything but overstatement; his admirers were outraged.

Then Hoover lashed back at the Warren Commission, which had mildly reproved his agency and urged greater cooperation with the Secret Service in protecting presidents. "Monday-morning quarterbacking," Hoover snorted, as the rest of the nation worried about presidential safety.

Last week Attorney General Katzenbach attempted to defend Hoover against the New York Times, which had printed an article alleging a lack of FBI coopera-

tion in the Justice Department's drive on organized crime.

Katzenbach replied that when law enforcement agencies "think they can make a good case by doing it alone" they sometimes try to do so, rather than work with other agencies, because of "professional pride and organizational jealousy"—which, he added, were sometimes "good things."

Hoover interpreted the Attorney General's remarks as a new assault and said there was "not a scintilla of truth in that as it pertains to the FBI."

The director's determination to defend his agency also is sometimes a good thing, but in these instances he may have overreacted and confounded his own purposes. For the FBI is under some criticism as an incipient secret police, and for having too much vigilance against communist subversion and too little against violations of civil rights and civil liberties.

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THE FBI, like a woman, has no greater asset than its reputation—however polished by Hoover. If the director's outbursts impair that reputation and feed public criticism, the country will be the loser.

If Hoover's sense of public relations has deserted him to that extent, he is no longer the phenomenon who erected Washington's only record of infallibility.

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