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WASHINGTON AP - Will FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover choose his 74th birthday next Jan. 1 to announce his retirement?

There's speculation in the Justice Department that he will, but no word from the director himself, nor from his close associates.

President-elect Richard M. Nixon is a friend of Hoover's, and possibly he'll be the only one entrusted with advance knowledge of Hoover's intentions.

Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark probably won't. The relationship between Hoover and Clark is known to have cooled in the past year.

A bigger question than Hoover's possible retirement date, however, is who will replace the man who has spent 44 years as the nation's top police officer.

It is said Hoover has never groomed anyone inside his organization, and there's speculation in Washington he may recommend someone from without.

One Washington newspaper-The Post-has speculated it might be San Francisco's police chief, Thomas J. Cahill. During an FBI Academy graduation exercise in October, Hoover described Cahill as "the best police chief in the country."

There has been talk, too, of 39-year-old John E. "Jack" Ingersoll, a former California policeman, being appointed to the job. Ingersoll was named director of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs four months ago.

Administration officials feel that if Hoover decides to retire next year, he won't do it until after Nixon is inaugurated. And Nixon could, of course, sign another executive order waiving the required retirement at age 70. President Johnson kept Hoover by this expedient.

Hoover, meanwhile, remains characteristically aloof. He turns down nearly all requests for press interviews.

Persons outside the FBI-and many of them within the organization-rarely see him.

The few friends Hoover has among newsmen rarely write about the FBI head's thoughts or activities. Nor do they speculate on his possible retirement date.

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