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Calvin Coolidge's Revenge

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Nov. 18 — Over the years since the early 1920's few persons have so roused, angered, amused and scared this jaded capital as has that inimitable stage presence, J. Edgar Hoover. This week, as if to redeem himself from the ghostly realm of myth and legend to which so many have sought to consign him, J. Edgar appeared almost in the flesh to remind Washington that he is the same as he has always been, only more so.

It happened in a rare and valuable two-hour interview with Ken Clawson of The Washington Post—an event remarkable in itself, since J. Edgar prefers to accept questions in writing or through intermediaries, and to talk personally, if at all, with more congenial publications—The Washington Star, perhaps, or U.S. News & World Report.

The interview, to which The Post properly gave as much prominence as it would to a Middle East settlement, was provoked by publication of a book by Ramsey Clark, in which the former Attorney General spoke reprovingly of J. Edgar's "self-centered concern for his own reputation."

J. Edgar replied to Mr. Clawson that Mr. Clark was a "jellyfish," a state that he equated with being a "softie"; this shows that he may know a lot about bank robbers but is vastly ignorant about marine life, since a jellyfish is one of the more formidable creatures of the deep. In fact, said J. Edgar, delivering what he obviously regarded as the unkindest cut of all, Ramsey Clark was the only Attorney General in his experience (and he has known most of them since Edmund Randolph) who was worse than Robert Kennedy.

Mr. Clark, who has survived stronger

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assault from higher authority, needs no one to defend him. Nor would J. Edgar's latest comic-opera attack even warrant comment if the whole episode were not so thoroughly characteristic—if it did not, indeed, rather well illustrate what Mr. Clark and other critics have been saying.

First, the remarks J. Edgar made to Mr. Clawson derive from his extreme sensitivity to criticism, either of himself or of the police agency that he has all but singlehandedly created in the years since he was appointed director by President Calvin Coolidge. This sensitivity was exactly what Mr. Clark had pointed to.

The ludicrous episodes caused by J. Edgar's fierce defensiveness are too numerous to mention; just recently, F.B.I. personnel were forced to withdraw from academic training at two different universities because of their instructors' mild criticism of the F.B.I. and J. Edgar. But this kind of thing stops being funny when it is realized that the F.B.I. is a police agency; that in its millions of personal files is a mountain of unevaluated and unproved information about American citizens; and that its operations range across the most sensitive areas of American society.

Can even J. Edgar's most devoted admirers or cringing sycophants maintain that such an agency ought to be immune from criticism? That when criticism comes from a political candidate, as it did in 1968 from Eugene McCarthy, the nation's highest-ranking policeman is then entitled to ask political retaliation by the voters, as J.

Edgar did? That when the failures of the F.B.I. have been as thickly documented as in the case of the Orangeburg massacre, it is sufficient for J. Edgar merely to denounce the authors of a book on the subject? That he is entitled to eavesdrop, and then surreptitiously make public the dubious fruits of the eavesdropping, on such a persistent critic of the F.B.I. as Martin Luther King once was?

But the most serious charge that anyone—including Ramsey Clark—has made against J. Edgar and his agency is that they have become, over the years, a classic self-perpetuating bureaucracy, operating more for their own interests within the Government and to maintain their own reputations and position, than as a disinterested investigative body letting the chips fall where they may. There is ample evidence that this charge is true, at least to some extent; it certainly is not refuted by—indeed it gains credibility from—J. Edgar's relentless blackguarding of every critic, however constructive.

Nevertheless, through his autocratic control of the F.B.I. and its functions, his undeniable bureaucratic genius, and a sense of public relations that has only recently started to fail him, J. Edgar has achieved virtually unlimited power and independence. To his credit, the instances of their misuse, measured against the possibilities that would have been open to a smaller man, have been relatively few.

In the long run, therefore, no President is likely to fire J. Edgar Hoover until he can find another man to whom he would willingly entrust such potential for the misuse of power. Nor, in the meantime, is any President likely to tell the old boy to shut up.