

Carl Rowan

FBI's Silence on Race

WASHINGTON — The public may regard it as just another juicy public squabble when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover calls former Attorney General Ramsey Clark a "jellyfish" or boasts that he "didn't speak to Bobby Kennedy the last six months he was in office" as attorney general.

But Hoover unwittingly has raised issues of compelling national interest. His incredible interview in the Washington Post has thrown a new spotlight on:

- — The old issue of whether, in 46 years, Hoover has made the FBI a law unto itself, not bending to the will of the attorney general, the President, the Congress, or the American public.

- — The relatively new issue of whether, as Clark claims, the FBI lacks "diversity," its agents coming primarily from that narrow segment of Americans whose racial background and ideology fit Hoover's concept of a loyal, reliable citizen.

Why was Hoover not on speaking terms with his boss for six months (a situation that of itself would put anyone else in the bureaucracy out of a job rather quickly)? Because, Hoover says, Kennedy pressured him "half a dozen times" to hire more Negro agents.

Hoover says he refused because Kennedy wanted him to lower standards and "discard the requirement that agents hold degrees in law or accounting. He even wanted to discard the bachelor's degree requirement."

Hoover adds that he told his boss: "Now, Bobby, I have no prejudices. The FBI has Negro agents, Indian agents, Chinese agents, and all kinds of other agents. Anyone who can meet the qualifications can have a job."

I thought a reporter was obligated to ask the FBI for some information not volunteered by Hoover.

How many blacks and other minority-group members are among the more than 7000 FBI agents?

How many white FBI agents do not have law or accounting degrees?

How many blacks are among the overall total of 18,000 FBI employees, and how many blacks or other minority-group members are in top-level jobs where they have even a remote influence on policy?

I knew that this information was compiled, because in the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson every department and agency had to make regular "fair hiring" reports to the Civil Service Commission.

A spokesman for the FBI refused to provide the data. The Civil Service Commission reported that the FBI's figures had been merged into the larger report of the Justice Department.

The Justice Department spokesman would say only that "about 1400 blacks are employed by the FBI." But how many are agents and how many are shining spittoons? The Justice Department wouldn't say.

THE IRONIC THING is that the information I requested has nothing to do with national security. This is the kind of information that all other agencies, by presidential order, must make available.

Which means that those two great champions of "law and order," the Justice Department and the FBI, are not at all timid about ignoring the law if that is what is required to protect what Ramsey Clark calls Hoover's "self-centered concern for his reputation."