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White House moving to limit powers of Next FBI director

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WASHINGTON — The White House is making quiet preparations to prevent the rise of another J. Edgar Hoover.

Well before President Nixon calls in the mastiff-faced crimefighter for a final visit and sends him the last laudatory "Dear Edgar" letter, a proposal will be ready to limit the next FBI director's term.

The staff work already has been started at both the White House and Justice Department on an executive order, or possibly a statute, to establish a fixed term. The tentative thinking is that no future FBI chief should serve longer than seven years.

Almost no one in Washington wants to see another FBI chief attain J. Edgar Hoover's immense power. It is a measure of his power that those who now seek to curb it are working in fearful secrecy.

No Attorney General, though supposedly Hoover's superior, has been able to control him. Presidents who may have wished to replace him have always thought better of the idea. Lyndon Johnson even waived the government's wise rule of mandatory retirement at 70 so Hoover could continue. And on Capitol Hill, the FBI is accorded the same deference as motherhood.

We have thoroughly explored the sources of Hoover's unique power. We have talked to White House aides and Justice Department officials, past and present.

Miles of files

All agree that Hoover has been able to cow Washington officialdom largely because he keeps files on the high and mighty. He has amassed raw information on Presidents and peons alike that fill miles of cabinets. Few politicians, therefore, will stand up to him for fear he might leak out derogatory reports against them. They know Hoover doesn't hesitate to traffic in unevaluated information. He has furnished undercover reports, backstairs gossip and other titillating tidbits to his political allies.

The durable old G-man has taken special pains to provide Presidents with intimate information from FBI files. This has usually given him direct access to the man in the White House.

In President Nixon's case, Hoover has been slipping him FBI data for years. This information helped Nixon to build a reputation as an anti-Communist crusader during his early days in Congress. The two men have now become close personal friends. Nixon likes to recall how he applied for a job with the FBI after his graduation from Duke and to kid Hoover about rejecting his application. The FBI chief blames it on an appropriations cut.

Yet the President believes Hoover is hurting himself and the FBI by hanging on to his job. Nixon desperately would like to find a graceful way to replace the old curmudgeon without bringing dishonor upon him.

Hoover established his closest relationship with Lyndon Johnson who, as a Senator, had lived across the street from him.

LBJ always had a fine appreciation for a story about a leader's extracurricular love life and Hoover kept him supplied with reports on the private hijinks of prominent Americans.

At the 1964 convention, Hoover assigned an FBI team, including his trusted No. 3 man, C. D. DeLoach, to Johnson. The FBI

Jack Anderson

men acted as personal political investigators for LBJ who wanted to keep track of every move at the Atlantic City convention, particularly the activities of the late Robert Kennedy, whom Johnson distrusted.

Hoover and Kennedys

As attorney general, Kennedy committed the unpardonable offense of issuing direct orders to FBI agents. The ice that formed between Hoover and Kennedy caused a chill felt all over Washington.

Yet Hoover maintained liaison with the Kennedys while they were in power by some slick administrative sleight of hand. The Kennedys had come to trust a dedicated young agent, Courtney Evans. Aware of this, Hoover split one of his units and created a special investigative division so Evans could be made an assistant director.

At that level, Evans could deal with the mighty. And Evans, to his credit, acted loyally as a liaison between the sulky old director and the Kennedys. Yet President Kennedy had made it clear, recall intimates, that he intended to retire Hoover at age 70.

But there was a new man in the White House on Jan. 1, 1964, when Hoover passed the 70-year mark. Indeed, it was Hoover who notified Robert Kennedy that his President-brother was dead in Dallas. The Attorney General told intimates afterward that Hoover "was not quite as excited as if he were reporting the fact that he had found a Communist on the faculty of Howard University."

Thereafter, the two men scarcely spoke to each other, and the chill extended to the hapless Evans who quietly left the bureau.

Hoover had Dwight Eisenhower's ear throughout his two terms in the White House. As one former aide told us: "Ike went for Edgar hook, line and sinker."

Truman took a stand

But not Harry Truman. With rare exceptions, the gritty Truman dealt with the FBI chief at arms length and compelled him to work through the Attorney General.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, despite his patrician tastes, came to depend on Hoover and dealt with him directly when he needed ammunition against his enemies. By 1939, Hoover was in such good graces at the White House that FDR did by executive order what might not have been possible by law. Roosevelt gave Hoover, with the stroke of a pen, control over all intelligence gathering, counter-espionage and security in the United States.