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Inside Report

J. Edgar Hoover Stays On

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

WASHINGTON — A decision made early last autumn* at the highest levels of the Nixon Administration to try to ease out J. Edgar Hoover as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was sidetracked when President Nixon himself changed his mind.

The scenario worked out called for a dramatic summit meeting at the White House between President and the FBI chief in which Mr. Nixon would praise Hoover and then ask for his resignation. The meeting took place, but the President never spoke his lines, never asked Hoover to quit.

NOW, IN A PRESIDENTIAL election year, administration officials believe it is too late to dispose of Hoover until after the election. Yet, these officials are of the same mind they were in writing last autumn's aborted scenario. They feel the FBI is in trouble — trouble that cannot be dealt with until Hoover is gone.

This bizarre situation underlines one of the major arguments for Hoover leaving: after 47 years running the FBI, Hoover's independent political power is so formidable that even the President himself shrinks from asking him to quit and will not even consider removing him in an election year.

The leading advocate of Hoover's dismissal inside the administration is one of the Justice Department's most militant anti-Communists and law-and-order advocates: Assistant Atty. Gen. Robert Mardian, a Goldwater Republican not hitherto accused of liberalism.

From the time he took over the Justice Department's internal Security Division in November, 1970, Mardian has been

shocked at Hoover's autocratic rule of the FBI and his hostility against any supervision from the Justice Department.

Moreover, Mardian is well aware of the little-known truth about the FBI today: far too much attention is spent on arresting petty thieves and catching Army deserters, not nearly enough on domestic intelligence and foreign espionage agents.

The FBI's inadequate record in the security field is attributed directly to Hoover. But worst of all is the shocking state of the bureau's morale. Justice Department officials and U.S. attorneys complain that highly competent agents are stripped of imagination and daring for fear of taking an unusual initiative that might bring a dreaded letter of censure from the ubiquitous director. No agency in the government is so widely and closely controlled from the top by a single man.

The result: most agents, particularly those in security work, would welcome a new director even though they subconsciously fear what might happen to the FBI, molded for 47 years in Hoover's image, when the change comes.

BUT FEW AGENTS in the field think that time will come anytime soon. The purge of high FBI officials who had been privately critical of Hoover, including some with close contacts in the Justice Department, deeply impressed agents in the field with Hoover's undiluted and dangerous omnipotence. They also find the same J. Edgar still making even Presidents dance to his tune. At least until after the 1972 election, President Nixon will keep right on dancing.