

Reading J. Edgar Hoover's Mail

IF THE ATTORNEYS GENERAL of the recent past had been reading their mail from J. Edgar Hoover, they'd have found out some remarkable things about the FBI. They would have learned that FBI agents had actually become active members in such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan, the better to destroy them. More important, the Justice Department's top management could have then reflected on the meaning for our society of such activity as the deep penetration of private organizations to the point where federal agents ran some Klan units and created organizations with the purpose of countering the political impact of groups Mr. Hoover declared undesirable.

The record shows that much of this information never came to the attention of the attorneys general, not because Mr. Hoover didn't send it up, but because nobody read his papers when they got there. How anyone could have overlooked some of the material is hard to imagine. It contained instructions to agents in the field from Mr. Hoover to "frustrate any efforts or plans they [the Klan] have to consolidate their forces; to discourage their recruitment of new or youthful adherents; and to disrupt or eliminate their efforts to circumvent or violate the law." Furthermore, they would have discovered that employees of the federal government were

being told to find out if any members of such organizations as the Klan were "immoral" so that the information could be exploited as a means of discrediting them. And on it went: "No opportunity," goes one directive, "should be missed to capitalize on organizational and personal conflicts of their leadership."

The Klan, and the racism it represents, are poisonous forces in our society. As an organization, the Klan has had a history of violence and bullying. Its members have been involved in some of the most heinous racial crimes that have occurred in this country. To the extent that the FBI could locate the perpetrators of those crimes, it had a right and an obligation to do so. If the agency believed that by planting informers it could learn of crimes before they occurred, it was justified on the basis of past experience in doing that. But the agency became zealous and its zeal went unchecked. In that process it appears to have overstepped the proper limits of a police agency by waging general warfare against the Klan, without respect to particular criminal activity; it set itself up, in effect, as a political arbiter of what was tolerable, in terms, on the part of a private organization. That is not a police function whether we are talking about a right-wing or left-wing group, a white or a black organization. The government should scrupulously avoid regulating ideas.