

... and Mr. Hoover

On New Year's Day 1970, President Nixon telephoned J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to congratulate him on his 75th birthday. Later in the day, Mr. Nixon let it be known that there were no plans for Mr. Hoover's retirement.

The F.B.I. director devoted much of that year to the battle against Black Panthers, insurgent college students, anti-war Catholic priests and a variety of other groups he considered threats to the nation's security. In October 1970, the President personally handed to Mr. Hoover and Attorney General John N. Mitchell the Administration's new anticrime bill which he termed a tool in the total war against organized crime and "terrorist" activities.

Yet 1970 was also the year in which, according to Mr. Nixon, Mr. Hoover's "protest" blocked the President's efforts to expand domestic intelligence gathering. White House documents published in The Times today disclose "Mr. Hoover's concern that the civil liberties people may become upset. "This was also the year in which Mr. Hoover's refusal to cooperate "shut off his agency's liaison with the C.I.A. altogether," in the President's words. This was one reason, Mr. Nixon has suggested, why ultimately the White House established its own security organization—the organization which later masterminded the Watergate and Ellsberg break-ins.

Mr. Nixon was not the only President who normally treated the late F.B.I. director with a deference that ought not to be accorded any public official in a democracy, least of all the chief of the secret police. It was nevertheless left to Mr. Nixon to extol Mr. Hoover's virtues during his lifetime and then to saddle the dead man with much of the blame for policies that ultimately led to C.I.A. and White House involvement in the Watergate scandal and its cover-up.

Old Team

In his choice of Melvin Laird, former Secretary of Defense and veteran Congressman from Wisconsin, as the new head of his domestic policy staff, President Nixon has selected a man with the political skills and experience which the former occupant of that post—John Ehrlichman—conspicuously lacked. The appointment has evoked a predictably favorable reaction on Capitol Hill and from Republican party activists.

Mr. Laird is an intelligent conservative who has shown himself flexible and shrewd. It is not easy to predict the impact he will have on the Administration's domestic and economic policy. Like former Treasury Secretary John Connally, the President's part-time counselor, Mr. Laird is likely to temper his ideological preferences with whatever measures look necessary to rebuild the President's popularity.

It is somewhat surprising that General Alexander M. Haig, so recently nominated to be Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, should choose to end his military career in favor of replacing H. R. Haldeman as Mr. Nixon's senior staff assistant. In accordance with the law and with sound constitutional practice, however, General Haig had no alternative except to bring to an end his anomalous dual role as a general on active duty and also the President's top civilian aide.

Also mildly surprising is the President's decision not only to retain Ronald L. Ziegler as White House press secretary but to increase his responsibilities. His dismal record, particularly during the past year when he repeatedly issued false and misleading statements about the Watergate case, argues for his retirement rather than his promotion.

Mr. Laird and General Haig are able men but they do not represent the infusion of new talent from outside the Administration which many observers believe is essential to restore public confidence in White House operations. Mr. Nixon apparently is only comfortable with familiar faces. In this time of adversity, he is sticking with the old team.