

MAR 19 1971

Investigating the F.B.I.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has responded with predictable denials to charges of vindictive treatment of its employes and obsolescence of its own bureaucracy. But the central question remains: is the F.B.I. as efficient as its mission requires and its own publicity proclaims? Senator George McGovern's call for an investigation of the F.B.I. is very much in order. It is in no way undermined by the blatantly political attack on the Senator by Clyde Tolson, the bureau's second-ranking official, who merely illustrates by his impertinent and thoroughly improper comments the kind of problem such an inquiry ought to examine.

Criticism of the bureau has gained in credibility because it comes increasingly not from political opponents, but from concerned insiders. A detailed letter by former agent John F. Shaw, for example, was written not for public disclosure but as an analytical and confidential exchange of views among law-enforcement experts. The document reached the public only because it impelled F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover to force Mr. Shaw's resignation under conditions that only do credit to Mr. Shaw and discredit to the F.B.I.

Another letter received by Senator McGovern, purporting to represent the views of ten F.B.I. agents, suffers the limitation of its authors' anonymity. But doubts that surround unsigned exposures must be tempered by the understandable reluctance on the part of any F.B.I. employe, following Mr. Shaw's experience, to put his career on the line. A major obstacle to F.B.I. efficiency according to these inside critics, is the F.B.I.'s obsession with protecting and enhancing Mr. Hoover's image.

Quite apart from these internal criticisms, questions concerning the bureau's effectiveness are raised by specific incidents related to the duties of a Federal law-enforcement and investigatory agency. For example, repeated failure to obtain easily verifiable background information on appointees to important and sensitive positions has embarrassed President Nixon and should have embarrassed the F.B.I.

At the very least, all this adds up to the need to ask hard questions about the efficiency and orientation of the bureau. Beyond the issues raised about Mr. Hoover's personality, there is legitimate concern whether the F.B.I. has outgrown its televised gang-busting image and its preoccupation with spy-thriller intrigues of domestic and international Communism sufficiently to focus attention on the real problems of crime, regardless of politics. Clearly, this is one investigation that cannot be left to Mr. Hoover himself.