

One of a Kind

By TOM WICKER

President Nixon did the wise thing in appointing an interim director of the F.B.I. immediately after the death of J. Edgar Hoover. Not only does the White House announcement that Assistant Attorney General Gray would serve at least until the November election suggest that ample time will be taken in the selection of a successor; it also makes clear that if Mr. Nixon should be defeated in November, the choice would be left to the new President.

That should avoid many possible complications. Not only would such a profoundly important nomination in the midst of an election year, unless it were truly impeccable, sorely tempt the Democratic Congress to a confirmation battle that could seriously impair the new man's effectiveness, or even defeat him; but in the event Mr. Nixon did lose the election, his successor would be most likely, anyway, to remove the Nixon appointee.

Any of those eventualities would bring to the directorship the aura of political partisanship that J. Edgar Hoover largely managed to avoid in his astonishing 48-year tenure. And with Mr. Nixon now forgoing the opportunity to make a nomination until his own mandate can be renewed by the voters, any Democrat who might be elected instead will be under heavy moral pressure to be at least as non-political and responsible in choosing a new director.

All of this is important because the directorship of the F.B.I., as that office is now constituted, may well be the single most important and sensitive office in American government; and while it is true that Mr. Hoover's personal attributes and manner of operating gave it much of its power, the office itself has far too much potential for abuse, as well as for great achievement, for it to be filled lightly or politically or with someone already damaged by partisan conflict.

Nevertheless, it would be possible to concentrate too much on the identity of the new director; before too many names are listed, for instance, it might be well to consider what sort of man he ought to be. At least two qualifications come readily to mind; clearly, a new director ought to be a man of established and reassuring reputation for integrity and strength, and—though it, unfortunately, was not the case with Mr. Hoover in recent years—he ought to be a man immersed in and a part of his time, not an unbending product of another era.

The degree to which a new director should be a professional in law enforcement and criminal justice is not so clear; to limit the field to such professionals would hardly be sensible but,

IN THE NATION

on the other hand, the public would be unlikely to have much confidence in a rank amateur, whatever his reputation in other fields.

Equally important is the role of the director and of his agency. Just as there can be no exact duplicate of J. Edgar Hoover, there is no need to accept without question that the way he developed and ran the F.B.I. need be the model for all time. Should any new director be capable of as much independence—from the Attorney General, from Congress, from the White House—as Mr. Hoover came to have? If not, where should more specific control be exerted?

The Attorney General, for example, is a partisan political appointee and is often, as in the Kennedy and Nixon Administrations, a political power. Should the director be a mere subordinate of such an official? As for the F.B.I. mission, should crime-fighting be separated from counter-espionage? Should a counter-espionage mission necessarily imply jurisdiction over domestic subversion? Will the one lead inevitably to the other?

J. Edgar Hoover was one of a kind. His death provides a one-of-a-kind opportunity to review, not just his work and that of the agency he built, but all the areas in which they operated—the Government's activities in fighting crime, espionage, subversion, in working with and training local and state police, in maintaining and disseminating sensitive records, statistics and dossiers.

Have these activities—not just the F.B.I.'s—always been properly conducted? Have they been effective? What changes and safeguards may be needed? It is no disservice to Mr. Hoover—it is a tribute to his powerful personality and performance—to say that these questions may now be answered more clearly than in his lifetime.

Mr. Nixon, having handled the matter so ably so far, might serve the nation well with still another preliminary step—the appointment of a small, expert, bipartisan group of members of Congress, law-enforcement professionals, present and former Government officials, complemented by some public members, to study such questions and offer recommendations. Mr. Hoover's death makes such a review of all the Government's police activities particularly timely; and the report of the study group could be ready for and of great help to the man who takes the Presidential oath next January.