

Acting ^{Examiner} Director's Challenge

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Tightrope Act at the FBI

By Sanford J. Ungar
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Washington

NO ONE CAN replace The Giant," acting FBI director L. Patrick Gray III said at a Flag Day ceremony here last June.

It was only a few weeks after President Nixon had named him — temporarily — to take over for "The Giant," the late J. Edgar Hoover, and Gray was accepting the 1972 Distinguished Citizen's Award from the Washington Lions Club, presented to Hoover posthumously.

Gray has learned a great deal since then, but even now, after 27 weeks in the job, he is still struggling with the problem of how to replace Hoover, keep the FBI running, satisfy all the appropriate people inside and outside and win permanent appointment to one of the most powerful jobs in U.S. government service.

It hasn't been easy, because part of the task confronting Gray is to deal with the extraordinary administrative chaos left behind by Hoover without ever publicly admitting its existence.

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HE MUST elaborately praise his predecessor — "This enlightened pioneer of professional law enforcement, whose distinguished career spanned one quarter of our nation's history (and who) waged a life-long battle against the forces of lawlessness, both criminal and subversive," as Gray put it in a speech to the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars last August.

Yet he must virtually undo much of what Hoover did in his last years and at the same time, rebuild public confidence



Acting FBI Director Patrick Gray at a San Francisco award ceremony.

By Greg Peterson

in the embattled FBI.

He has to convince the FBI's oldtimers and professional investigators, who are absolutely essential to the bureau's day-to-day operations, that nothing fundamental will change. But he has to change enough to attract new blood and young innovators.

Gray must also persuade the White House, where he has powerful enemies, that he can be trusted, politically and professionally, to run a super-sensitive agency for the next four years.

Ironically, however, if he gets the long-range nomination from President Nixon, as the first FBI director requiring Senate confirmation, he must convince Congress that he can be independent politically and professionally, from the White House.

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MOST OBSERVERS agree; after six months, that Gray has done relatively well so far, and he appears to have won unexpected allies within the bureau and among the public.

But others, including some long-time bureau officials, say they fear that the FBI might be dangerously politicized under his control, because of his close identification with a particular President and political party. The same concern would be raised, no doubt, about almost anyone likely to be named FBI director.

A few bureau-watchers go so far as to appeal for the appointment of a "new Hoover," whose credentials would be sufficiently bipartisan that he could outlast one or two changes in the presidency.

Although he is unpopular with some

of the President's closest political lieutenants, Gray is known as a dyed-in-the-wool Nixon loyalist. He considers himself a conservative on most issues, but compared to Hoover he is moderate. He does not hesitate to depart from Administration orthodoxy by, for example, advocating strong federal gun control laws.

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DESPITE SOME reports that he was long under consideration as a potential successor to Hoover, Gray maintains to this day that he was completely surprised when Mr. Nixon tapped him as the acting FBI director the day after the 50-year veteran died of a heart attack last May.

One reason Gray is convincing on that point, says a bureau source, is that "when he took over, he didn't know a damn thing about the FBI."

Then assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department's civil division and the President's unconfirmed nominee for deputy attorney general (a position he never got to occupy because of the delay in Attorney General Richard Kleindienst's approval by the Senate), Gray's only real previous managerial experience had been in the Navy's submarine service.

Except in his position as chief court enforcer of the wage-and-price freeze, he had no law enforcement experience at all — a fact that was not lost on the FBI's senior hierarchy when he took over.

Gray has neutralized some of the concern on this point by merely acknowledging

ing his status as a neophyte. In speeches, he has repeatedly called himself, at 56, "a newly minted law enforcement professional."

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IN HIS EARLIEST days in Hoover's plush suite on the fifth floor of the Justice Department building, Gray bedeviled some of the FBI's ranking officials with what one frankly called "stupid questions."

He would demand a full explanation, for example, of each step of the procedure followed by the bureau in investigating bank robbery cases, and some feared that he was planning to order impulsive and uninformed changes.

"But what we discovered was that he was just trying to learn, and usually he would tell us to continue what we had been doing for years," a source explained. "But it sure took up a lot of our time, answering his questions."

Gray asked his questions in part because he had no better idea than the average citizen of the quality of the FBI's performance.

Gray had the benefit of no congressional reports or other government agency reviews of the FBI because none exist.

Only the House appropriations subcommittee headed by Representative John J. Rooney (Dem-N.Y.) has had any mandate to supervise the bureau's affairs, and its deliberations have long been characterized by a willingness to endorse anything Hoover said or did.

When he took over, Gray found that Hoover had ruptured the FBI's liaison

with most other federal agencies, had virtually lost interest in fighting organized crime and was running things largely on the basis of whim and personal predilection.

The acting director is as aware as anyone that there may be a push to increase the public accountability of the FBI, and as a prerequisite he is trying to make it accountable to him.

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GRAY'S AMBITIOUS tours of field offices, speeches and press conferences around the country have encouraged more public discussion and more questions about the FBI.

He has given so many speeches in the past six months that he may be better known among the people now than his titular boss, Kleindienst, or any other member of the President's cabinet.

They are speeches that would do any ambitious politician credit, geared to the particular audience or occasion, often quoting from John Adams, Alexander Hamilton or the Federalist Papers (his favorite leisure-time reading).

Gray's speaking tours, which critics say make him look as if he were running for the directorship, have provoked disdain in some White House quarters and annoyance among others in the Justice Department, including its public information office.

He steadfastly insists, however, that they are not political, either in a personal or an administrative context, but merely part of his efforts to bring the FBI to the people.