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The Route Out of the FBI's Paralysis

The angry resignations last week of three veteran officials close to J. Edgar Hoover, while denuding the troubled Federal Bureau of Investigation of top leadership, was an essential first step toward breaking the FBI's present paralysis.

Experts who recognize the bureau's crisis have long believed that removal of the Hoover clique was step No. 1. That suddenly is well along the road. Step No. 2, the belated installation of a permanent successor to Hoover, may be long delayed as another result of the Watergate scandal's general immobilization of government.

In the meantime, the malaise of the FBI carries severe implications for national security. This menace is posed by a former FBI official: would not a hostile foreign power greatly expand espionage here when both the FBI and CIA are wracked by demoralization and paralyzed leadership?

The problem any FBI director will face as long as the bureau's headquarters are infested by Hoover proteges was brought home a month ago shortly after William D. Ruckelshaus bowed to President Nixon's virtual command to become interim director. To show he is more than a caretaker, Ruckelshaus called special agents-in-charge from the FBI's 59 field offices to Washington.

Ruckelshaus spoke for about 20 minutes, then left the room. The floor was next held for two hours by the FBI's No. 2 man, acting associate director W. Mark Felt, who made no secret of his contempt for his new boss. Felt noted that Ruckelshaus complained about paper work passing over his desk—yet Mr. Hoover, he went on, could do three times that much work any old day. That set the tone for the meeting.

An agency once famed for loyalty and secrecy has become a center of in-

subordination and disclosure. Ruckelshaus found that out in attempting to stop news leaks from the FBI, ordinarily intolerable in law enforcement. Although it is common knowledge that the leaks have flowed from the 13 assistant directors, they have nonchalantly informed their new chief that the information leaked from elsewhere in government.

Both the self-assured Ruckelshaus and the unfortunate, inept L. Patrick Gray before him inherited a staff purged in Hoover's last days of all his critics. The survivors were sycophantic Hooverites, predictably hostile to any non-Hoover successor. Felt's reputation at FBI headquarters was that of a hatchetman carrying out Hoover's purges.

Consequently, last week's quiet resignation of the 60-year-old Felt and two assistant directors also closely aligned with Hoover, while stripping the FBI of experienced leadership at a critical period, permits a new high command loyal to a new director. But Felt's successor as associate director can scarcely be appointed until a permanent director is named, and that day is far off.

Ruckelshaus, who may have blighted his bright political future in Indiana by accepting Mr. Nixon's command appointment, definitely does not want the job permanently. But chances now are that he will not be replaced until the distant end of the Watergate investigation.

The selection may well involve a long process conducted by a presidential panel headed by a judge. Although mute publicly, Ruckelshaus is known to believe Hoover's successor cannot be a partisan politician—neither a blindly loyal Nixon operative such as Pat Gray, an independent political figure such as Bill Ruckelshaus, nor even a Democratic politician. He does not rule out an FBI agent, but no senior agent seems sufficiently removed from the bureau's recent seamy history to win Senate confirmation.

The malaise of the FBI was revealed recently when Ruckelshaus ordered the FBI to locate the now famous 1969-70 wiretaps, then believed destroyed. His subordinates, confused by the politicization of the bureau under Gray, asked whether he *really* wanted to find out where they were (in other words, was he asking merely to have the records show he had asked?). His answer: find the files.

When the files were discovered in the White House (as FBI officials probably expected), Ruckelshaus announced that fact without first contacting the President's office. Although the White House said nothing, presidential aides were miffed that he had added to Mr. Nixon's problems.

To figures close to the situation, the incident underlines the need to restore self-esteem, independence and discipline to the once universally honored FBI. But with an immobilized Mr. Nixon unable so far to achieve his own salvation, the naming of a permanent director and subsequent restoration of the FBI may be delayed, indefinitely and dangerously.