

Presidents and the F.B.I.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has provided lurid confirmation of longstanding suspicions about the Federal Bureau of Investigation: successive Presidents of the United States made use of the F.B.I. as a political police force, and the bureau under J. Edgar Hoover reveled in the assignment. The record of the past four decades speaks volumes about the seductiveness of power.

There is little wonder that a man who performed nasty political chores for a series of Presidents could come to feel justified in attempting under the cloak of national security to break careers, ruin reputations and make life itself dangerous for selected targets. And, because successive White Houses had made him custodian of the nation's dirty laundry, there was no one to check him anywhere in Washington. With each new demonstration of usefulness came a new layer of seamy secrets which further secured Mr. Hoover's independence from the constraints of law, his superiors and the Congress of the United States.

In one damning sentence, the Senate committee staff set out the result of this indulgence in secret power: "[The] F.B.I. intelligence system developed to a point where no one inside or outside the bureau was willing or able to tell the difference between legitimate national security or law enforcement information and purely political intelligence." By the time Richard Nixon became President, the practiced seaminess had become so entrenched that the deceptions of Watergate flowed with alarming naturalness.

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The institutional lessons are clear. Congress has the prime responsibility: to cut back the F.B.I.'s jurisdiction and define it sharply, to set forth clearly what is permitted and what is proscribed and to enact severe and credible criminal sanctions against lawless behavior by Federal law enforcement officers. It also has the responsibility of exercising its continuing oversight functions in an informed and diligent manner.

In the executive branch, the Attorney General bears principal responsibility for controlling the F.B.I. The internal procedures of the Department of Justice and its pattern of dealing with the rest of the Government, particularly the White House, should be adjusted so that it is impossible for him to evade this responsibility.

And, finally, there is the White House. One would hope that future Presidents will value individual freedom more highly than the urge to enhance personal power. But, if they do not, it is up to their subordinates in the executive branch and the coordinate branch of Congress to remind them of the dangers which a political police force presents to this country's cherished values.