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Hoover Interview

Editor's note: Approaching 70, J. Edgar Hoover is once again the subject of criticism and controversy. But he is fazed by neither and looks forward to a continuing active career. He granted an exclusive interview to Don Whitehead, author of "The FBI Story" and former Associated Press correspondent and told him of his plans for the future and his views on the place of the FBI in the Nation's law enforcement apparatus.

By Don Whitehead

Washington, Dec. 4. (AP)- J. Edgar Hoover has survived more than 40 turbulent years as director of the FBI under seven presidents. Now he merely chuckles at those who talk of his early retirement.

Hoover, who is 69 years old, said in an interview:

"I feel fine. I'm in better physical condition than I have been in years. And I intend to remain active because I just don't like the rocking-chair life. If I retired, I wouldn't enjoy life very much."

Hoover gives every appearance of a man who is enjoying life hugely, even when it becomes a bit hectic as it has been in recent days. He is 33 pounds lighter than he was six years ago. He appears to have lost little if any of his old restless energy. And he places no cut-off date on his future.

Part of his exuberance, no doubt, comes from the fact that President Johnson waived last May the requirement that he retire at age 70 -- which he reaches in January.

"So, you might say I'm hooked -- and I'm happy about it even though staying on the job will cost me money," Hoover said. "If I retired, I could, under the new law, draw a tax-free pension of \$30,000 a year. But by staying on the job, I must pay a substantial part of it in income taxes."

Hoover said he had observed that men who remain physically and

He mentioned Bernard Baruch, Winston Churchill and the late Herbert Hoover as examples of men who continued active, useful lives long after they had passed 70.

"If I quit," he said, "I think I would have trouble. After three or four days of vacation, I get so itchy for activity that I call the office and ask them to send me some work."

The FBI chief at first was more interested in talking of his health than such matters as his tiff with the Rev. Martin Luther King, the civil rights leaders, and his annoyance with the Warren Commission 's report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. He shoved them into the background.

"A few years ago," he recalled, "I spent the Christmas holidays in Miami with friends. We ate at all the best restaurants -- a lot of rich food -- and when I got back to the office I was much too heavy.

"Then I got an invitation to a formal dinner at the White House. When I got out ~~of~~ my dress suit, I could hardly squeeze into it. In fact, I was afraid during the evening that I'd pop something loose. That is when I decided that I == and all my special agents -- were going to take off weight. A survey had showed that almost one agent in ten was too fat.

"I took off 10 pounds in a short time merely by leaving off the bread, butter, potatoes and chocolate cream pie. Now I'm down 33 pounds to about 170. And we have only five overweight agents in the entire bureau."

Hoover, who has served as director of the FBI since 1924, speaks with affection of the late President Kennedy and his father, Joe Kennedy.

"I have known Joe Kennedy for many years," he said, "and I knew the boys after they grew up. My relations with John were very cordial. Soon after his election, and before his inauguration in January 1961, he called me and asked me to stay on as director of the FBI. He also called Allen Dulles and asked him to remain as head of CIA. I told him I would be happy to stay."

As to his differences with King (whom he recently called "a notorious liar"), The FBI chief added: "I don't enjoy a controversy and I don't go looking for one. I have tried for years to avoid public disputes. But I can not let attacks on the FBI go unchallenged when they are not justified. If I didn't speak out in defense of my agents, I would have no morale left in this organization."

About two weeks ago, Hoover leveled some harsh words at his critics during a news conference attended by women reporters. Some thought the words popped out on the spur of the moment, but such wasn't the case. For several months Hoover had been smarting under reports of criticisms from civil rights leaders, which he felt added up to:

Defining the efforts of the FBI to bring to justice the men guilty of slaying civil rights workers and bombing Negro homes and churches in the south; advising Negroes not to take their problems to the FBI; saying most FBI agents were southerners who were not sympathetic to the Negroes' cause; blaming the FBI when the Department of Justice decided not to prosecute certain complaints, and criticizing the FBI's cooperation with "segregationist" police officers in law enforcement.

In his talk with the newswomen, Hoover replied to the criticism.

"The time has come to be blunt," he said in the latest interview. "Public trust in the FBI is an important part of law enforcement and national security. If that trust is chipped away, our defense against crime, espionage and subversion is weakened."

Then he added: "They seem to forget that we have been in the fight to preserve civil rights for the past 40 years. We were fighting against injustices before many of our present critics were born."

In his interview the director said that pressures have increased to turn the FBI into a national police force; people who should know better are suggesting that more and more of the responsibilities of law enforcement should be transferred from local police to the FBI.

"It has been intimated that in protecting the life of the President of the United States," he said, "that federal officers should take into custody everyone who might conceivably be a threat to the President's life when he visits a city.

"This would mean picking up every communist, kook and beatnik in a city and holding them without charge. If federal officers did this there would be a tremendous uproar over the violation of these people's civil rights -- and rightly so."

Hoover still thinks the Warren Commission was unjustified in chiding the FBI for not having passed the name of Lee Harvey Oswald along to the Secret Service as a potential killer. It was Oswald whom the commission held solely responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy.

Hoover contends there was nothing in the record to suggest that Oswald was dangerous.

"Total security for the President of the United States is ridiculous," Hoover said. "When he is gregarious and loves to move around, you can't box him in. You can advise him to take certain precautions -- but that doesn't mean he will take them."

Hoover said there is pressure from Civil Rights leaders for the FBI to give personal protection to civil rights workers and those demonstrating for civil rights causes. The proponents argue that local police cannot be trusted to view the Negro cause with sympathy.

"They want us to be bodyguards and to give personal protection," Hoover said, "but that is impossible. It was even suggested at one time that our agents should drive the buses used by freedom riders going across Alabama. I refused to do it. Our agents cannot be chauffeurs for any cause."

"After all that has been written, so few people know what we legally can do and can't do. Our agents can not be used as instruments for social reform. They are law enforcement agents. Their job is to gather facts when there is an indication that a federal law has been violated. These facts are

"An FBI agent is not authorized to pass judgment on the guilt or innocence of a person. He can only gather the facts and let the facts speak for themselves. If he were allowed to become an investigator, judge and jury all in one, then we would have on constitutional law enforcement. We would have a police state."

Hoover is convinced that the only sound law enforcement system is one based on ~~tax~~ a local police system working in cooperation with the federal agencies. He argues that the main police responsibilities lie at the local level and must remain there. He insists that this system, with all of its faults, serves the cause of justice best and should be improved upon rather than changed or destroyed.

"We still have trouble with some red-neck backwoods sheriffs," he said. "We still find police forces with whom we can not cooperate. But law enforcement today is far better than it was 30 years ago. The police are better trained and I like to think this is partly due to our training of police officers at our national police academy."

"I believe the FBI is operating on sound principles. My duty is to see that it keeps a steady course and is not used to serve any pressure group."

Then he added with a grin: "I expect ~~to expect~~ to be around quite a while, too."

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