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The World Today 500

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WASHINGTON AP

- The FBI was a pretty crummy outfit when he took it over, full of political pets and incompetents. He quickly built it into an American institution. It's been that way since. In three years he had cleaned out the misfits and put it on its feet. This has been a great satisfaction to J. Edgar Hoover but peace of mind doesn't always accompany satisfaction. He's been picked and pecked at almost from the beginning. Some times he has reacted with heat. Much of the criticism has been ludicrous.

Hoover had been a lawyer with the Department of Justice seven years when he was chosen at 29 to head the bureau of Investigation, which wasn't called the Federal Bureau of Investigation until 1935. He is 72 now and today is the 50th anniversary of the start of his government service. He has headed the FBI 43 years. In the government, retirement is mandatory at 70 but in his case President Johnson waived that requirement.

He set the course the FBI has followed from the day the then-attorney general, Harlan Fiske Stone, offered him the job. He said he would accept only on these conditions:

He'd run the agency. Politicians couldn't tell him what to do or whom to hire. Appointments would be by merit and so would advancement. He staffed the FBI with young lawyers and accountants as agents whose number has risen from 441 to 6,625.

Before they are accepted they must survive an investigation of their conduct, common sense and loyalty. And they have to go through a 14-week training course.

The year after he took the job Hoover laid down a rule which still is in effect: an agent must by his conduct eliminate criticism. Even in their clothing the agents are inconspicuous.

Hoover put the FBI ahead of most of the nation's police departments - probably all of them - in 1926 when he warned his agents never to use threats or inducements to get confessions. You never hear of FBI agents using third degree.

It has been a rather stylish tradition among some liberals to criticize Hoover as a dictator. There is no doubt he runs the FBI with an iron hand. But anyone who objects to that can try to answer this question:

If you were running an agency like the FBI, and didn't invoke rigid discipline, how would you keep the politicians' paws off it and keep your agents free of outside discipline and inside corruption?

What has been overlooked or forgotten is that Hoover has never sought to extend his power but, on the other hand, opposed its extension.

He opposed President Franklin D. Roosevelt's idea that the FBI should take over all federal investigations.

In the 1930's, when the country was shaken by spreading gangsterism and killings and demands were being made to federalize the nation's police, he opposed that, too.

And he has insisted from the beginning that local problems of law and order are the jurisdiction of the local authorities, not the FBI.

In Roosevelt's day there were reports that liberals in his administration were turning sour on Hoover, fearing he had too much authority, while at the same time Ku Klux Klan leaders were trying to get him out.

He was criticized for the way he made it. This has been an endless story. It just takes new variations from time to time.

He has even been criticized for almost never holding a news conference, and being very hard for newsmen to see individually, although he is not required to hold such conferences and whether he does or not is his strictly his privilege.

Hoover summed up his bureau's problems in 1956 when he said of civil rights cases: the FBI is unpopular if it obtains facts which result in prosecutions and it is unpopular if it doesn't.

He told his agents...