

F. B. I. Under Fire

For decades, under a half-dozen Presidential administrations, J. Edgar Hoover has enjoyed a carefully nurtured immunity from attack and even from criticism that only the most sacred cow in the entire structure of the Federal Government could ever hope to achieve. But as the Federal Bureau of Investigation under his leadership encounters increasingly heavy going on several different fronts, his durable public relations triumph seems to be falling apart.

Former Senator Eugene McCarthy may, in his quiet way, have started this change of public mood in 1968 when he showed that the heavens did not fall upon a Presidential candidate who had the temerity to urge Mr. Hoover's dismissal. In recent months Representative William R. Anderson of Tennessee has criticized the F.B.I. chief for publicly implicating the Berrigan brothers in a bombing conspiracy before a grand jury had returned any indictment against them. Senator George McGovern of South Dakota has called public attention to the F.B.I.'s extraordinarily hard and vindictive personnel policy toward any agent who incurs the director's disfavor. Senator Joseph M. Montoya of New Mexico has articulated the long-prevailing suspicion among members of Congress that the F.B.I. sometimes taps telephones on Capitol Hill. Now Representative Hale Boggs of Louisiana, the majority floor leader in the House, has expressed a developing consensus that Mr. Hoover at 76 has outstayed his usefulness.

Successive Presidents and Congress itself shared the blame for letting the F.B.I. become overextended and Mr. Hoover's reputation bloated beyond anything the underlying facts justified. Only a year ago Congress unwisely and unnecessarily extended the bureau's jurisdiction to include the investigation of bombings and other disorders on college campuses. The House and Senate Judiciary Committees have allowed Mr. Hoover to cite statistics of ever-rising crime year after year without calling him to account for what he was doing about it. Appropriations Committees have actually boasted that they have never cut his budget requests.

President Nixon and his immediate predecessors of both parties have been more eager to win Mr. Hoover's public praise of them than to exercise their supervisory authority over him. In defending Mr. Hoover against Representative Boggs's attack, Attorney General Mitchell was unctuous in his deference. "He should recant at once and apologize to a great American," was the Attorney General's admonition to the Congressman. Under these circumstances, it is no cause for surprise that Mr. Hoover acts as if he were accountable to no one and that he has successfully bamboozled much of the public into considering him infallible.

The hard truth is that the F.B.I. needs not only a new director but also a major reorganization. Professionals in the law-enforcement field generally agree that many of the F.B.I.'s methods are outdated and its procedures and organization unresponsive to the central problems it should be tackling.

The United States is the only major nation which combines crime detection and political intelligence in the same agency. Some of the blunders which have come to light in recent months are due to the attempts to have one investigative force do these quite different kinds of work. New men and new methods, not old hero worship and old public relations, are needed to make the F.B.I. genuinely effective.