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Victor Lasky

Nixon's Attitude Toward Hoover

Washington

UNTIL RECENTLY, there had been talk at the White House about the necessity of replacing J. Edgar Hoover as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

How President Nixon himself felt about proposals to staff the FBI's highest echelons with "new blood" was never made clear. But it was known that the President had become increasingly concerned about morale problems within the FBI as well as indiscreet remarks about pending cases made by the director.



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For a time, there was even high-level speculation as to the identity of Mr. Hoover's successor.

Then came the recent avalanche of anti-Hoover publicity in leading publications, mostly of the liberal persuasion. This was topped off by the extraordinary charge by Representative Hale Boggs, the Democratic leader in the House, that the FBI was adopting "the tactics of the Soviet Union and Hitler's Gestapo" by, among other things, wiretapping the telephones of members of Congress.

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THE ALMOST immediate result of all this is that any White House thinking about replacing the 76-year-old Hoover has about dissipated. Now the Nixon Administration is gearing its forces to defend Hoover against "vicious and unfounded charges."

The most "vicious" charge, it is said, was the one about phone-tapping. Attorney General John Mitchell put it this way: "Let me repeat categorically: The FBI has not tapped the telephone of any member of the House or Senate, now or in the past."

Boggs insisted he had "proof positive" of his allegation. Asked to produce the evidence, the Louisiana Democrat said he would do so eventually.

Most of his colleagues in the House and Senate doubt he has such evidence. As Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, the assistant Democratic leader, put it: "I think there is a good bit of imagination involved here."

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IT WAS more than imagination, according to Deputy Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst. Kleindienst said the House majority leader was either "sick or . . . not in possession of his faculties" when he accused the FBI of keeping congressmen under surveillance and tapping their phones.

Significantly, not one of Boggs' colleagues rushed to his personal defense. And for good reason. The congressman's personal problem is no secret on the hill.

One thing is certain. It is highly unlikely that President Nixon will bow to the criticism of Democratic senators who are seeking to oppose him in next year's presidential race.

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AND THAT is why the administration is insisting on a congressional investigation of anti-FBI charges leveled by critics like Boggs. The White House believes there is nothing to the charges and that, in the end, J. Edgar Hoover will come up smelling like a rose.

This is not to say that Hoover has not presented problems to the Nixon administration. Particularly embarrassing were comments made about the Berrigan brothers four months before the two Catholic priests and several cohorts were indicted on formal criminal kidnap charges.

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