

Is the FBI Director on the Skids?

By Russel Sackett

Washington

A DEMOCRATIC campaign aide was indulging in a rueful review of the opposition, Richard Nixon.

"He's going to Peking. He's going to Moscow. China is in the UN. He has a family-support measure. He finally embraced most of our economic program. He's getting the troops home from Vietnam. The only things he hasn't done are to register as a Democrat and fire J. Edgar Hoover."

Make a note of it. The quiet talk around the FBI these days is that the Democrats can scratch one more campaign issue: The White House is planning to replace Hoover after the first of the year, perhaps as early as January.

Swift Transfers

It is a measure of the change that has come over the Bureau in the past year that there can even be speculation on the thinking of its members concerning the redoubtable Director. Such apostasy in the past has been rewarded by swift transfers to Butte, Mont., or worse.

The director was as timeless as a monument, so regarded and so spoken of. But things have loosened up a little at the FBI, and in the context of Hoover's organization, that's a lot.

According to insiders, the Director's departure originally was planned by the Administration for early this year. It has been postponed by a suggestion of trauma, notably the theft and subsequent publication of FBI records from the Media, Pa., office; the attack on the Bureau from the floor of Con-

gress by Majority Leader Hale Boggs (D-La.); several national articles pointing up the desirability of Hoover's retirement; the departures from the Bureau of several high-ranking men, not all of them under friendly circumstances.

Still Powerful

As each of these events occurred, the scaffold was dismantled and stored away. "It could happen again," one knowledgeable source said.



AP Wirephoto

J. EDGAR HOOVER

"Hoover is still so powerful that the White House would never dump him under fire from the Democrats or the press."

Whether Hoover is brought to bay before or after Attorney General Mitchell resigns to take over the leadership of the Nixon campaign for reelection, the trophy will belong over Mitchell's fireplace.

It turns out that Hoover's instincts were right all along: You should never get too friendly with an Attorney General. He has the authority, if he has the guts, to or-

der you around. But, aging and perhaps wishing to draw a little closer to the fire, the Director himself let himself admire the ice-cool man who is his on-paper boss and warm public defender.

Hoover's approval of Mitchell — and of President Nixon — was logical enough. The President and the Attorney General were attuned on law and order, in favor of electronic surveillance, opposed to coddling criminals, appalled by the Warren Court; they liked the FBI and they regarded J. Edgar Hoover as a patriot and a great man.

"The AG really thinks a lot of the old man, too," a close observer noted. "If you have any doubts, just pay attention to what he says when J. Edgar retires."

Hoover, however much admired, presented a problem to the Attorney General, and Mitchell is a very direct man. His presence has been felt increasingly in FBI offices this past year.

Bureau news releases, for example, untouchable as holy writ in the past, had begun to be edited by the Justice Department Information Office. The most notable example to date was the happy face put on an FBI release noting a crime increase; after editing by the Justice, the release noted a decrease in the rate of crime increase.

The Palace Guard

The Attorney General and others in the department began getting friendly with key men in Hoover's FBI palace guard, talking over problems and letting them know that if they had grievances the door was always open.

One of those befriended was William Sullivan, the scholarly FBI career man

and Hoover favorite who was seen by many as a possible successor to the Director. Sullivan was reportedly encouraged by Mitchell to air some disagreements with the Director. Sullivan, the story goes, did just that, thinking that he had Administration backing.

Hoover lost no time in putting Sullivan on leave and then changing the lock on his office door. Sullivan is now retired from the Bureau and teaching in New Hampshire. "He was an administration-launched Kamikaze," a friend said. "They just were not quite ready to send in support."

Criticism Encouraged

Nor was the Justice Department discouraging an outbreak of criticism of Hoover in the rest of the Federal intelligence community — including the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency and the military intelligence organizations.

The gist of the criticism was that the Bureau just wasn't getting the job done in the areas of espionage and domestic security. The specific complaint was heavy FBI restriction on surveillances.

Ironically, those restrictions were being placed by the Director himself, grown suddenly skittish over adverse publicity. Informed sources say that Hoover personally ordered scores of electronic devices "turned off" without giving any reason, and that he also called a halt to some of the "dirty games" long accepted as part of spy chasing — e.g., the "bag job" — stealing and copying documents from luggage.

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