

For nearly a half century J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation were indistinguishable. That was at once his strength and its weakness. The extraordinary—and extraordinarily valuable—institution that he created became so identified with his personality and his character that, long before the end, Mr. Hoover had become an institution in himself, increasingly and unfortunately remote from the mainstream of American life and thought.

Appointed 48 years ago by Calvin Coolidge's Attorney General, Harlan F. Stone, the youthful Hoover was entrusted initially with the task of cleaning up one of the shadier agencies in what was then known as the "Department of Easy Virtue." Mr. Hoover built, by sheer personal strength, a clean and highly effective agency, with trained and devoted personnel and some of the finest crime detection facilities in the world. Along with the rest of the country, the gangsters and kidnapers of the thirties acquired a healthy respect for the G-Men, and so did scores of Nazi agents and saboteurs in the decade that followed.

Inevitably an agency that was so quickly clothed with glamor and was so soon established as a model for the young took on a sanctity that seemed to place it above criticism—and sometimes above the law itself. As it reached this position of untouchability by the fifties, the country's (and therefore the Bureau's) focus of fear had moved from gangsters and Nazis to real or alleged Communists in government, to atomic spies and to leftist political dissidents—with civil rights proponents, peace demonstrators and campus radicals soon to follow. A force handpicked for crime detection and for its devotion to the ultra-conservative personal philosophy of J. Edgar Hoover was not necessarily the agency best able to cope with the subtleties of racial disaffection or radical politics.

While the F.B.I.'s anti-crime work continued with distinction, Mr. Hoover himself became identified behind the scenes with many political leaders of the right. His great mistake was to allow his own political and philosophical tendencies to be projected in public, thus doing violence to the basic requirement of his office: total and absolute political neutrality.

During all this time, Mr. Hoover and his men were wrapped in an increasingly protective immunity for criticism by Congressmen, Attorneys General, Presidents and public. Not one to suffer silently the rare adverse comment that came his way, Mr. Hoover lashed out fiercely at even his mildest critics; and those within the Bureau courageous enough to voice criticism suffered harsh reprisal.

The moral of Mr. Hoover's astonishing career is that any public servant, no matter how able or how devoted, can be spoiled by exemption from the normal workings of democratic government. Through the autocratic exercise of concentrated power and the failure of his superiors in Congress and successive administrations to exercise effective checks, Mr. Hoover became especially in his later years a symbol of domestic illiberalism. Yet the fact that he was allowed to remain in office far too long and was permitted to become almost a separate and independent arm of government cannot obscure wholehearted recognition of his unique service to his country in the field of law enforcement for nearly five decades.