

The **FBI** Story

by Don Whitehead

CHAPTER 16

# FBI's Battle for Survival

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In 1940, President Roosevelt and Atty. Gen. Robert H. Jackson saved the FBI from being destroyed by attacks as savage as any ever seen in the jungle of Washington politics.

J. Edgar Hoover once told a visitor: "No one outside the FBI and the Department of Justice ever knew how close they came to wrecking us."  
Who were "they"? The records from the archives of the FBI tell the story, a story of plots and intrigues and insinuations.

**Reaction Violent**  
The main attack began after Hoover went before a House subcommittee on appropriations on Jan. 5 to make his annual report on how the FBI was spending its share of the taxpayer's dollar and performing its duties. In discussing President Roosevelt's proclamation of Sept. 6, 1939, announcing the FBI's broadened responsibility for national security, Hoover said:

"... when this work was assigned to us we organized the General Intelligence Division, which will have supervision of espionage, sabotage, and other subversive activities, and violations of the neutrality regulations. . . . We have also initiated special investigations of persons reported upon as being active in any subversive activity or in movements detrimental to the internal security."

"In that connection, we have a general index, arranged alphabetically and geographically, available at the Bureau, so that in the event of any greater emergency coming to our country we will be able to locate immediately these various persons who may need to be the subject of further investigation."

Hoover's statement was like the steel point of a dentist's probe touching an exposed nerve in a decayed tooth. The reaction was violent. The first attack came from Rep. Vito Marcantonio, left-wing Congressman from New York, who told the House that Hoover's security preparation "lay the foundation . . . for a Gestapo system in the United States."

**Red Campaign**  
An informant gave the FBI a report on a Feb. 6 meeting of Communist leaders in Washington where plans were made for a campaign against Hoover and the FBI. This report said:

"It was proposed at this meeting that the campaign should have two principal phases, one an attack upon the Bureau as violating civil liberties and secondly a personal attack upon the director. . . . Communist writers were assigned to this second phase of the campaign. It was also planned at the meeting that the services of certain Congressmen would be enlisted in endeavoring to obtain Congressional restrictions upon the Bureau's activities."

The rumor in Washington at this time was that Hoover had lost his strongest supporter when Atty. Gen. Frank Murphy left the Department of Justice to become an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court — and that the new, liberal attorney general, Jackson, would put the handcuffs on Hoover and the FBI at the first opportunity.

The storm broke against the FBI on Feb. 6. Special agents arrested 30 men and a woman in Detroit and a man in Milwaukee who had been indicted on charges of conspiring to recruit volunteers for the Spanish Loyalist Army. All of them were either admitted Communists, members of known Communist-front organizations or openly Communist sympathizers. The arrests had been ordered by the Justice Department.

**FBI Called "Menace"**  
The cry arose across the country that these arrests were an example of the FBI's persecution of people who happened to have political views contrary to those of Hoover. Hoover was called a greater menace than "a nest of spies." The FBI was described as an OGPU, a Gestapo, a sinister menace to intellectual freedom. There were doubts raised in the minds of honest people who then

voiced these doubts without waiting to hear the facts.  
The New Republic discussed the arrests in an editorial headed "American OGPU." The magazine said:

"In foreign countries people are forced by their governments to submit to their Gestapos. In this country, Hoover has the voluntary support of all who delight in gangster movies and ten-cent detective magazines. . . ."

Many FBI critics had been hopeful that Jackson would take their side against Hoover and the FBI. But Jackson started them. He stood by Hoover. One explanation

was given in a column by Joseph Alsop and Robert Kimmer, who reported that Jackson had looked into the FBI's activities and "to his surprise" discovered that the Bureau was operated along legitimate lines.

**Inquiry Demanded**  
Early in March, an FBI informant

had reported that the national committee of the Communist Party had met in New York City and agreed that "the time is ripe" to make the Detroit cases a national issue. A decision was made, the informant said, to "canvass trade unions and all kinds of progressive organizations throughout the country asking them to demand an investigation of the FBI."

"These demands came — in a flood of mimeographed resolutions purportedly adopted by labor groups. They said, 'There is every evidence to believe that J. Edgar Hoover is preparing for a repetition of the shameful Palmer raids, in which he participated, with the object of attacking and

destroying the various unions.' They called on the President and the attorney general to suspend Hoover pending an investigation."

Rep. Emanuel Celler of New York was among those to defend Hoover. He told a radio audience that Hoover " . . . was a special assistant attorney general (who) had nothing to do with the arrest or so-called persecution of individuals. He simply handled the cases in the courts as they were presented to him."

**Attacks Diminish**  
One of those listening to Celler's broadcast was attorney Morris Katzoff, then living in Boston, who had been one of the lawyers defending those rounded up for de-

portation in the Palmer raids. Katzoff wrote Hoover:

"The cases of 1919 immediately came back to my mind and I also recalled that you had nothing to do with the irregularities and harsh treatment of aliens suspected of being Communists; I also recall a hearing . . . at which you deplored as sincerely as we did the incidents attending the circumstances connected with arrests of aliens in New England, and I recalled how genuinely I was impressed by your sincerity as well as with your thoroughness in presenting your argument, and I felt it my duty as being one of the very few footloose men up to the present moment who could

from personal knowledge say a word in defense of a man unjustly accused of wrong-doing."

The attacks on Hoover and the FBI began to diminish and lose force after an incident during the dinner given on March 16, 1940, by the White House correspondents.

President Roosevelt was the guest of honor at the head table, which was placed on a raised platform to give the hundreds of diners a view of the Chief Executive. Roosevelt spotted Hoover among the guests and called to him. "Edgar," he said, "what are they trying to do to you on the Hill?" Hoover shook his head and re-

plied, "I don't know, Mr. President."

Roosevelt grinned and turned his thumbs down on the table. "That's for them," he said. The word soon spread around Washington that Roosevelt had turned thumbs down on the attackers of Hoover and the FBI. (Tomorrow: The FBI Goes to War.)

**SAUD SEES FRANCO ENVOY**  
ALGECIRAS, Spain — King Saud of Saudi Arabia, en route to the United States, received a representative of Generalissimo Franco in his royal suite during a stopover of the liner Constitution here Wednesday.

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President Roosevelt was a strong supporter of J. Edgar Hoover at a time when the FBI's inquiry into communism was under heavy fire. Here Hoover watches FDR's sign federal arrests bill.

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