

How far will Freeh take FBI shakeup?

by Edward Spannaus

Since taking over as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation on Sept. 1, former federal judge Louis Freeh has taken a number of steps to shake up the FBI bureaucracy, a hardened apparatus which has been run at the top levels in recent years by the group of career agents known as "neo-Hooverites."

This is the group whose bureaucratic maneuvering and back-stabbing led to the removal of the previous FBI director, William Sessions. While continuing many of the reforms set in motion by Sessions, Freeh appears determined that he will control the bureaucracy, not the other way around. How far he will be able to pursue this, and whether he will attempt to root out the continuing police-state practices for which the FBI has become notorious, remains to be seen.

The most dramatic step yet taken by Freeh was his Dec. 10 suspension of James Fox, the head of the FBI's New York field office. Fox was scheduled to retire in January; Freeh suspended him for violating a court order by making statements to the news media concerning the World Trade Center bombing case.

The *Washington Times*—among the most fervent defenders of the Hooverites and neo-Hooverites—reported anger among FBI agents over Freeh's action. "This is not playing well with the people I know," said one. "I guess the new director was telling everyone there's a new regime and he's in charge." In a commentary in the same paper on Dec. 29, Freeh's suspension of Fox was denounced as "outrageous," "unbelievable," "insensitive," and as something "that would have embarrassed even Hoover."

More significant is the pending January retirement of Floyd Clarke, the current number-two in the FBI; Clarke is considered the key member of the neo-Hooverite triumvirate which includes Oliver "Buck" Revell and John Otto. There are also rumors that Revell, currently in "exile" in Dallas, will also retire soon.

Drugs and money laundering targeted

Shortly after Freeh took over in September, he began what was described as a "major reshuffling," along the lines recommended in an internal study commissioned by Sessions over a year earlier. The changes would include eliminating two top positions supervised by Clarke, doing away with many mid-level positions, and redeploying many agents out to the field from headquarters.

On Dec. 11-12, Freeh visited Italy to attend a memorial mass in Palermo for his friend, the murdered judge and anti-Mafia fighter Giovanni Falcone. Following meetings with Italian officials, Freeh and the Italians vowed closer cooperation and emphasized the importance of targeting money laundering. Italy's Interior Minister Nicola Mancino said that Rome and Washington were committed to breaking up money laundering in eastern Europe, South America, and Japan.

"There are very strong organized crime groups emerging in Russia, Japan, and Korea which will pose a major challenge to authorities in the future," Freeh said. "We are finding evidence on both sides of the Atlantic that these groups are working together in joint criminal ventures."

Freeh also thanked the Catholic Church in Italy for its efforts in fighting the Mafia. After a private meeting with Pope John Paul II on Dec. 11, Freeh said they had discussed this. "I have to commend the efforts of Italy's priests and the pope for energizing and motivating Sicily's young people to reject organized crime," he said.

In reporting on Freeh's statements vowing to "root out" the Mafia, the Dec. 13 *New York Times* said that Freeh "seems to be somewhat out of step with changing criminal justice priorities" in the United States, where street crime and gang violence are the top issues. Freeh defended his emphasis on organized crime by saying: "The heroin trade that takes place in the city we just left [Palermo] does more with respect to violence and death than all the random shootings in America."

Out of step?

Freeh also may be somewhat "out of step" with the tough-on-crime show-offs in Congress. Speaking at the National Press Club in Washington on Dec. 8, Freeh criticized some of their favorite hobby-horses, such as mandatory minimum sentences and the death penalty.

Asked about mandatory minimum sentences, Freeh said that completely uniform and comprehensive minimum sentencing standards were "not practical and in some cases were not fair." He explained that there are some crimes and some defendants for whom severe minimum sentencing is not only necessary but required; but "to apply that concept across the board, which I had to do as a judge, was not, in my view, always amenable to fairness or practicality, and in many instances, I think, contributed to an increasing prison population when some other alternatives could have been considered." Asked if capital punishment really serves as a deterrent to crime, Freeh replied that he has read all the literature on both sides of the issue, and that, "in an overall scheme, I think the deterrent effect is probably very minimal."

As to Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders's suggestion that drug legalization should be studied, Freeh responded: "It would take me about 30 seconds to study it. I think all of the information and experience I have has shown that it is a completely unacceptable option."