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Trouble in the F.B.I. Lab

For decades the Federal Bureau of Investigation's high-tech crime laboratory has been considered the ultimate in forensic sleuthing, world-famous for its ability to solve hard cases from a piece of fiber, a sliver of paint or a speck of blood. But that reassuring image was shattered this week by reports of astonishing incompetence and possible dishonesty in the handling of evidence in some of the Government's most important criminal cases.

F.B.I. Director Louis Freeh, to his credit, openly acknowledges "serious administrative and technical problems" at the lab, and says the agency has already begun to address them. The Director also expresses confidence that the report of the agency's inspector general, which has not yet been made public, will not support charges of intentional falsification or tampering with evidence. But the fact that the lab's glaringly inept performance could go unnoticed and uncorrected until now, and the treatment of the whistle-blower who brought the situation to light, suggest a larger problem in the bureau's prevailing culture.

The inspector general's inquiry began in 1995 after complaints by Frederic Whitehurst, a chemist in the lab's explosives unit. Not surprisingly, those complaints did not ingratiate Mr. Whitehurst with the agency's upper echelon. But as David Johnston and Andrew Revkin of The Times have reported, many of Mr. Whitehurst's criticisms have since been corroborated by other officials in interviews with the inspector general.

The stories of the lab's sloppy handling of evidence recall the inept performance of the Los Angeles police lab in the O. J. Simpson case. In the Oklahoma bomb case, for example, F.B.I. examiners are said to have shipped critical evidence to the lab, such as the faded black jeans worn by the defendant Timothy McVeigh when he was arrested, in a brown paper sack instead of sealed plastic evidence bags. A gun and knife purportedly belonging to Mr. McVeigh were sent to the lab sealed only in a manila envelope. Travel cases that were potentially contaminated with explosive residue were placed in an area where bomb debris had been stored, rendering them useless for testing.

The impact of the lab's problems on this and other prosecutions is not yet known. But defense lawyers have been armed with potent ammunition to challenge the F.B.I.'s forensic testimony, in Federal, state and local cases.

In response to the inspector general's findings, the agency has reassigned three laboratory employees who worked on the Oklahoma City bombing case. It has also demoted Mr. Whitehurst, who had been agitating internally for six years before his

appearance on ABC's "Primetime Live" in 1995 prompted the Justice Department investigation. He has now been put on paid suspension. Mr. Freeh says that when it is finally issued, the report will show this is not retaliation. That remains to be seen. But Mr. Freeh needs to consider the chilling message he has sent to other useful critics.