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AT THE FBI

Series of problems is a sign something's wrong

What's wrong at the FBI?

It's a question that takes on new urgency in the wake of a scathing report on an 18-month investigation of the bureau's crime laboratories, — probably still the world's premier investigation agency.

It's too soon to know exactly what impact the report will have on crimes prosecuted under forensic evidence provided by the labs. Of particular concern are some high-profile cases, such as the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the April 1995 Oklahoma City federal building bombing.

The good news is that the report outlines some changes in policies and procedures to correct the serious problems. Also, the bureau is working quickly to correct the problems, hire an outside scientist to head the labs and restore confidence.

FBI Deputy Director William Esposito said the agency's labs have a staff of about 600 and perform more than 600,000 examinations each year in criminal cases.

Donald Clark, FBI special agent in charge of the Houston region, pointed out this week that there are 35 units in the labs, but only three were found to have problems, and the investigation found no systemic contamination of evidence, no perjury and no tampering with evidence.

But while the labs controversy should not be overblown, when taken as one in a series of events it prompts serious questions about

where the FBI is headed.

Other examples include: the Travelgate scandal; the release of sensitive FBI background files to operatives in the Clinton White House; congressional criticism in connection with a botched FBI interview with a suspect in the Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta.

The issue is not the good intentions or integrity of the vast majority of the agents and lab personnel of the FBI, but rather what cultural or institutional dysfunctions are present in the agency that lead to such continuing problems.

One of the most disturbing allegations has been that lab personnel may have started with a premise and then tested the forensic evidence to prove out that premise instead of dealing with the evidence on a purely scientific basis and letting it present the conclusions. Some are advocating that there be more separation between the laboratories and the investigations arms of the bureau, and that is a proposal that should be seriously considered.

Although FBI Director Louis Freeh took over at the agency only in 1993 and cannot bear total responsibility for all of the problems, it must be questioned whether he is the man for the job of cleaning up the agency and restoring public confidence in it. So far, the signs are not good.

Americans have too valuable an institutional and emotional investment in the pride and professionalism of the FBI to let the problems continue and have no one answer for them.