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The Church Committee: The Good and the Bad

A new select committee in the House of Representatives, led by Representative Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), was created for the purpose of investigating the “weaponization” of U.S. intelligence agencies for the benefit of the Democratic Party.

Not surprisingly, Democrats and their media allies quickly asserted that this new committee should be compared — unfavorably — with the 1975 United States Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, better known as the Church Committee after its chairman, Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho).



AP Images

Power politics: Created in 1975 to investigate U.S. intelligence agencies, including the CIA and FBI, the Church Committee, chaired by Senator Frank Church (right), included prominent political figures of the time.

The first Church Committee is generally held today in high regard, so much so that the Republicans leading the present effort to investigate questionable activities of the U.S. intelligence community have appropriated the name for their own committee. The first Church Committee is credited with forcing reforms on intelligence agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA). Such reforms include the executive order by President Gerald Ford to ban assassinations of foreign political leaders; the creation of a permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in both the House and Senate; and requiring intelligence agencies to seek approval from a special court before surveilling American citizens.

Renato Mariotti, a former federal prosecutor and a columnist for *Politico* magazine, was among those who opposed the creation of the present committee led by Representative Jordan. He told *Time* magazine, “I am skeptical of the [Jordan] committee, because what it appears to be doing is trying to further a narrative rather than conduct a true, independent look at practices that are of concern.” Ironically, Mariotti has appeared on various news outlets, such as ABC News and CNN, praising the January 6 Committee, which was clearly trying to “further a narrative rather than conduct a true, independent look” at what happened on January 6, 2021.

In order to better understand the need for today’s “Church Committee,” a look at the original Church Committee of the 1970s and the reasons for its inception is in order.

CIA Out of Control

The CIA was created in 1947, at a time of great national concern about the threat from the Soviet Union, which was attempting to spread its communist system around the world. President Harry Truman signed the legislation creating the CIA, but expressed concern that the agency could actually become a threat to the very liberty it was ostensibly set up to preserve. Years later, Truman told his biographer, Merle Miller, that his agreeing to create the CIA “was a mistake. If I’d known what was going to happen, I never would have done it.”



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Truman added, “Now, as nearly as I can make out, those fellows in the CIA don’t just report on wars and the like, they go out and make their own, and there’s nobody to keep track of what they’re up to. They spend billions of dollars on stirring up trouble.... It’s a government all of its own and all secret. They don’t have to account to anybody.” He concluded that this was not what the Founding Fathers had in mind.

Recent comments by Senator Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) confirm Truman’s analysis. Shortly after Donald Trump was elected president, Schumer opined that Trump is “being really dumb” by taking on the intelligence community. “Let me tell you, you take on the intelligence community, they have six ways from Sunday at getting back at you.” If what Schumer said is true — and it no doubt is — that should concern every American. The CIA was created for the supposed purpose of protecting American liberty in a world of foreign threats, as the *servant* of the American people. No president should have to fear his own intelligence agency simply because he publicly criticized it.

No doubt there were many patriotic and liberty-loving Americans who went to work for the CIA in its early years, believing that it was founded as an anti-communist organization. But the reality is that, from its very beginning, the agency regularly consorted with communists. In fact, one of its recent directors, John Brennan, cast his first vote in 1976 for Communist Party candidate Gus Hall for president. Apparently, Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford were just too far to the right for Brennan. Tellingly, when Brennan joined the agency in 1980, the CIA had no problem with the fact that he supported a communist for president (which he admitted to the CIA).

Formation of the Church Committee

After *The New York Times* published an article by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh in December 1974 — reporting that the CIA had conducted many illegal domestic activities, including experiments on U.S. citizens — President Ford created a commission to investigate CIA activities within the United States, the United States President’s Commission on CIA Activities within the United States. (Keep in mind that the CIA’s charter was only for *foreign* intelligence, not domestic activity.) Ford named Vice President Nelson Rockefeller to chair the new committee, which led it to be known as the Rockefeller Commission. Considering that the Rockefellers had long ties with the CIA, this might seem like a case of the fox guarding the henhouse. But the Rockefeller Commission did reveal information about Project MKUltra, a CIA mind-control study. White House aide Dick Cheney edited the commission’s findings, excluding many other findings from the final report, including nearly 100 pages about CIA assassination plots.

Concerned that the Rockefeller Commission was something of a whitewash, the U.S. Senate created a select committee to investigate the U.S. intelligence community, particularly the CIA, chaired by the aforementioned Senator Frank Church.

Doing some good: Although a liberal Democrat, Senator Frank Church was careful to cultivate a more moderate image in his state of Idaho. His committee did uncover important information on the American intelligence community. (AP Images)



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The Church Committee certainly reported many disturbing activities of the CIA and other intelligence agencies of the U.S. government. For example, the committee investigated Project MKUltra, revealing that the CIA had drugged and tortured U.S. citizens as part of a series of experiments on mind control. (The man who would later become known as the Unabomber — Ted Kaczynski — was among those experimented on while a student at Harvard.)

COINTELPRO, another CIA activity, involved the surveillance and infiltration of American political and civil-rights organizations. Family Jewels was a program to covertly assassinate foreign leaders; Operation Mockingbird was a systematic propaganda campaign with domestic and foreign journalists working for the CIA, along with multiple U.S. news organizations, that covered up such CIA activity. Project Shamrock was an operation in which major telecommunications companies shared their traffic with the National Security Agency. Even Army intelligence spied on the civilian population, a revelation unearthed a few years before the creation of the Church Committee.

The committee also conducted an investigation into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. They questioned 50 witnesses and examined 3,000 documents, with their focus on the support of the CIA and FBI for the Warren Commission. The Church Committee was particularly concerned whether there was any connection between the CIA plans to assassinate foreign leaders, such as Cuban communist dictator Fidel Castro, and Kennedy's assassination. They concluded that the CIA's investigation into the Kennedy assassination had been deficient, which led to the creation of the House Select Committee on Assassinations. That committee eventually decided there was evidence that probably more than one assassin was involved in the murder of President Kennedy.

Both the CIA and FBI had collectively intercepted, opened, and photographed more than 215,000 pieces of mail, the Church Committee learned. CIA agents had stuffed mail in briefcases or in coat pockets to avoid detection by postal officials.

Senator Church, appearing on NBC's *Meet the Press* in August 1975, expressed concerns that the capability to monitor any messages that "go through the air" could be "turned around on the American people, and no American would have any privacy left: such is the capability to monitor everything — telephone conversations, telegrams, it doesn't matter. There would be no place to hide.... If this government ever became a tyranny, if a dictator ever took charge in this country, the technological



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capacity that the intelligence community has given the government could enable it to impose total tyranny.”

Ignoring Media’s Role

Certainly, the CIA and other intelligence agencies have abused their powers over the last several decades, and the Church Committee did some good work in pulling back the curtain on some of their more abusive actions. However, the committee seemingly ignored what could be described as the incestuous relationship between U.S. intelligence agencies and the mainstream media — a relationship that continues, in many ways, to the present day.

According to an article written by Carl Bernstein for *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1977, it was estimated that more than 400 American journalists had secretly carried out work for the CIA. William Paley of CBS was among the powerful news executives who willingly cooperated with the agency, as did Henry Luce of *Time*, Arthur Sulzberger of *The New York Times*, and James Copley of the Copley News Service. Organizations that worked closely with the CIA from the years following the Second World War up to at least the 1970s included ABC, NBC, the Associated Press, UPI, Reuters, Hearst Newspapers, Scripps-Howard, *Newsweek*, the Mutual Broadcasting System, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *New York Herald-Tribune*. CIA officials themselves have said the most valuable news outlets were *The New York Times*, CBS, and Time, Inc.

While these media giants are generally described as left-of-center, the founder of *National Review*, William F. Buckley, Jr., first worked for the CIA after graduating from Yale. Buckley even wrote a series of novels glamourizing the CIA. Of course, Buckley’s brand of supposed conservatism was of a type that would fit well within the CIA’s activities.

Historically, professional journalists have been afforded a great amount of deference by foreign governments, even hostile ones. But if these foreign powers learn that a supposed “objective” journalist is spying on behalf of the CIA, that could place all foreign correspondents in jeopardy. Stuart Loory, a former correspondent for *The Los Angeles Times*, wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “If even one American overseas carrying a press card is a paid informer for the CIA, then all Americans with those credentials are suspect.” Loory noted that, while journalists are apt to shine a spotlight on others, they are less likely to do so on themselves. “When it was reported,” Loory lamented, “that newsmen themselves were on the payroll of the CIA, the story caused a brief stir, and then was dropped.”

Bernstein noted that former CIA Directors William Colby and George H.W. Bush “persuaded the [Church] Committee to deliberately misrepresent the actual scope of the activities in its final report. The multivolume report contains nine pages in which the use of journalists is discussed in deliberately vague and sometimes misleading terms,” and very little was said about the role broadcast executives played “in cooperating with the Agency.”

One high-level CIA official told Bernstein, “There was a time when it wasn’t considered a crime to serve your government. This all has to be considered in the context of the morality of the times.”

Of course, serving the CIA is not necessarily the same thing as serving one’s country, and the CIA is supposed to be serving the people of our country, rather than the other way around. And, as President Truman feared, the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community can come to believe that they *are* the government — a permanent unelected government, regardless of who is in the White House or in



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Congress — or, in modern parlance, a “Deep State.”

This is where the original Church Committee failed the most, in not exposing the incestuous relationship between the permanent Deep State and what is supposed to be an independent media. Despite all of the evidence that the CIA made widespread use of journalists, the Church Committee opted against questioning any of the reporters, editors, publishers, or broadcast executives whose relationships with the agency were detailed in the files of the CIA.

Bernstein learned that the use of journalists and the continuing and extensive use of academics for recruitment and information-gathering purposes were two areas of inquiry that the CIA most avoided becoming public. Because the relationships were voluntary, Walter Elder, a deputy CIA director, argued, the committee lacked jurisdiction in the matter. One member of the committee told Bernstein that Church himself was “much more interested in making headlines than in doing serious, tough investigating. The Agency pretended to be giving up a lot whenever it was asked about the flashy stuff — assassinations and secret weapons and James Bond operations. Then, when it came to things that they didn’t want to give away, that were much more important to the Agency, [CIA head William] Colby in particular called in his chits. And the committee bought it.”

One prominent media giant that was an exception to this incestuous relationship was *U.S. News & World Report*, under David Lawrence. According to Bernstein, Lawrence “repeatedly refused requests by the CIA director [Allen Dulles] to use the magazine for cover purposes. At one point ... Lawrence issued orders to his sub-editors in which he threatened to fire any *U.S. News* employee who was found to have entered into a formal relationship with the Agency.” One senator told Bernstein that the CIA considered the secret relationship with the press the “highest, most sensitive covert program of all.”



Church Committee 2.0? Representative Jim Jordan is chairing a new committee to investigate allegations of abuse of American liberty by intelligence agencies such as the FBI and CIA, both of which are an integral part of what is often called the Deep State. (AP Images)

Going Forward

It would be naïve to think that intelligence agencies no longer maintain such relationships with at least some media sources. We know that executives at social-media giants such as Facebook and Twitter have willingly done the bidding of the Deep State, as evidenced by the requests of the FBI that the



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Hunter Biden laptop story — which could have changed the outcome of the 2020 presidential election — be buried. This illustrates a very important point that cannot be overemphasized: Many within the CIA and other intelligence agencies consider themselves the permanent government of the United States, and they have allies in the mainstream corporate media to maintain that position. They are not simply supporting the present occupant of the White House, but interfering in presidential elections (as they did in both 2016 and 2020) to help the candidate they prefer — the candidate most likely to preserve their position in the Deep State.

As Jordan's committee proceeds in its work, this is one area in which they need to differentiate from the Church Committee if we are to maintain limited, constitutional government in this country.



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