

Portraits in Oversight:

Frank Church and the Church Committee



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Frank Church holds CIA poison dart gun at committee hearing with vice chairman John Tower on September 17, 1975 (Source: U.S. Capital, photo by Henry Griffin)

[Frank Church](#) led one of the most important oversight investigations ever undertaken by Congress into covert operations by the U.S. intelligence community. His work began on January 27, 1975, when the Senate voted 82-to-4 to form the U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities; it would come to be called the Church Committee, after its chair.

Created in response to explosive revelations of the U.S. Army's program of domestic surveillance and [an article](#) published in the *New York Times* on December 22, 1974, by Seymour Hersh exposing assassination attempts on foreign officials by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the committee launched a series of investigations into American intelligence agencies including the CIA, National Security Agency (NSA), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Senator Church represented Idaho in the U.S. Senate from 1957 to 1981, and was a key figure on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His willingness to investigate the intelligence community, which often put him at odds with members of his own Democratic party, and his experience serving as an intelligence officer in the Army during World War II, made him the ideal candidate to chair this bipartisan committee. Senator John Tower, a Texas Republican, was made Vice-Chair at Sen. Church's request, and he also chaired some of the hearings.



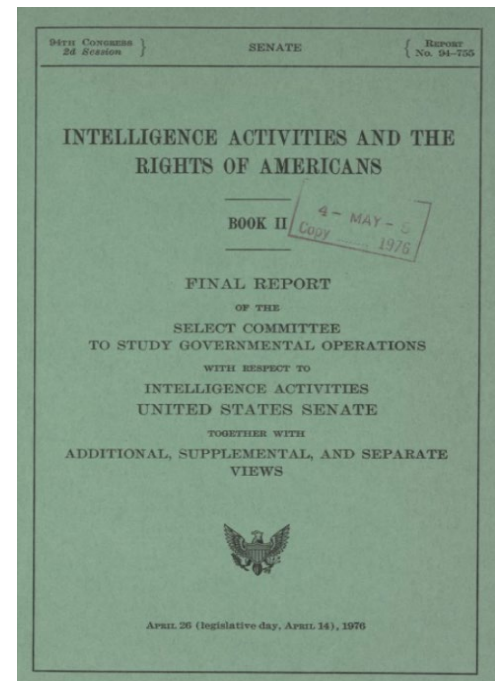
Front page of New York Times featuring Seymour Hersh's article, December 22, 1974 (Source: NYT Archives)

Senate leadership carefully appointed the remaining nine members to ensure a bipartisan effort.

At times, Senator Church faced criticism from his own party for what they viewed as concessions to the Republican members of the committee, but he refused to apologize for pursuing unanimity among committee members. In the end, all 14 reports issued by the committee were supported on a bipartisan basis, and the inquiry won praise for its sustained bipartisanship.

The 16-month investigation, which included 126 committee meetings, 40 subcommittee hearings, 150 staff members, and 800 witness interviews, uncovered shocking facts and intelligence operations that had been unknown to both Congress and the public:

- [Attempted assassinations](#) of President Fidel Castro of Cuba, President Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- [COINTELPRO](#): Covert operations by the FBI to infiltrate and discredit domestic organizations that it considered “subversive,” such as civil rights activists, feminists, environmentalists, protestors of the Vietnam War, and communists.
- [Project Mockingbird](#): CIA recruitment of journalists to spread propaganda through the media.
- [Project MINARET](#): NSA monitoring, with the cooperation of telecommunication companies, of communications of individuals on its “Watch List,” which included Senator Church, fellow Church Committee members Walter Mondale and Howard Baker, as well as Otis Pike, chair of the House committee investigating the intelligence agencies (known as the “Pike Committee”).
- [Project SHAMROCK](#): Copies of all telegrams going in and out of the United States sent by telecommunications companies to the NSA which then disseminated them to other intelligence agencies.
- [HTLINGUAL](#): The interception and review by the CIA of mail sent to the Soviet Union and China under the guise of foreign intelligence; and the targeting of prominent civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.
- [Project MKUltra](#): CIA experiments conducted on American citizens in which high doses of LSD and other drugs were given to see if individuals became more susceptible to brainwashing techniques or interrogation.



One of the volumes of the Church Committee's final report, published April 29, 1976 (Source: Law Library of Congress)



Seal of the CIA (Public Domain)

- [Project MKNaomi](#): CIA and Army covert operations to develop and stockpile an array of biological agents without the authority of the Congress or president, including poisons in quantities that could kill tens of thousands and offensive weapons capable of delivering them.

The committee's [final report](#), published on April 29, 1976, required six volumes and totaled 2,702 pages. Although much of the documentation related to the report was classified, the committee defied the wishes of President Gerald Ford to release only a summary of the findings. The reports and other information released by the Church Committee remain one of the most comprehensive public disclosures of intelligence abuses in American history.

The committee's findings also led to important reforms:

- President Ford issued [Executive Order 11905](#) banning political assassinations.
- The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was created in 1976, as a permanent committee to provide "vigilant legislative oversight over the intelligence activities of the United States to assure that such activities are in conformity with the Constitution and laws of the United States" ([Senate Resolution 400](#)). In 1977, the House followed suit and established the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.
- Congress enacted the [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act \(FISA\)](#) in 1978, requiring intelligence agencies to submit requests for search warrants to a special federal court and obtain court permission before initiating surveillance of American citizens.
- Congress established a fixed ten-year term for the director of the FBI.

Perhaps most importantly, the Church Committee proved the need for Congress to have access to classified information and exercise ongoing oversight of U.S. intelligence agencies. Though a committee had been previously established for that purpose, Senator Church commented, "The trouble is, the watchdog committee never really watched the dog." Of his committee's work, Senator [Church said on NBC's Meet the Press on August 17, 1975](#):

Now, why is this investigation important? I'll tell you why: because I don't want to see this country ever go across the bridge. I know the capacity that is there to make tyranny total in America, and we must see to it that this agency and all agencies that possess this technology operate within the law and under proper supervision so that we never cross over that abyss. That is the abyss from which there is no return.

For more information about Frank Church and the Church Committee:

- [Senate.gov: Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities](#)

- [American HistoryTV on C-Span: Church Committee Hearings on FBI Intelligence Activities](#)
- [Reel America: The CIA's Assassination Chemical Weapon \(Senate Hearing, 1975\)](#)
- [Frank Church Institute: Curtailment of the National Security State: The Church Senate Committee of 1975 - 1976](#)
- [Frank Church's Papers, 1941 - 1984, at Boise State University](#)
- [Church Committee demonstrated value of bipartisan oversight \(op-ed by Senator Carl Levin\)](#)
- [Levin Center Conference, 10/20/2015: "Congressional Oversight of Classified Programs - 40 Years after the Church Committee"](#)
- [National Constitution Center: Looking back at the Church Committee](#)

