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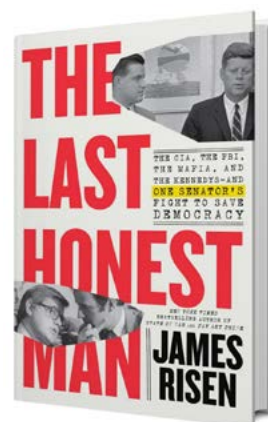
## *The Last Honest Man* *The CIA, the FBI, the Mafia, and* *the Kennedys—and One Senator's* *Fight to Save Democracy*

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Frank Church arguably is the most significant figure in the history of congressional oversight of intelligence. The Idaho Democrat's leadership of the Senate Select Committee to Investigate Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, familiarly the Church Committee, cast unprecedented scrutiny on the Intelligence Community—specifically programs and operations of questionable morality and legality. Along with those of the White House's Rockefeller Commission and the House of Representative's Pike Committee, the Church Committee's efforts in 1975–76 brought about a permanent change in public accountability for the US government's most prominent secret agencies. Never again would CIA, FBI, and NSA be able to operate with the clandestinity they had enjoyed in preceding decades.

No biography of Church has been written since 1994, and, notwithstanding its overlong and overblown title, *The Last Honest Man* by longtime intelligence writer James Risen and his son, journalist Thomas Risen, is a solid and generally fair profile that does justice to Church's lasting influence on US intelligence. They thoroughly recount his upbringing, education, local influences, and early interest in politics and displays of oratorical skill. Church got intelligence training in the US Army and served as an order-of-battle analyst in China in 1945. He married the well-connected daughter of a prominent Idaho family, survived a serious bout of cancer by way of an experimental treatment, and at age 32 won a long-shot bid for a US Senate seat in 1956, refusing along the way to use scandalous material against his incumbent opponent.

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One of the book's main themes is the dual nature of Church's character: "the ambitious, publicity-seeking politician yearning for acceptance in Washington ... and the radicalized outsider who hated the Washington establishment, the Frank Church who despised the American imperialism represented by a spy agency prepared to kill foreign leaders." (5) This twofold quality made good sense in Idaho politics. Church survived and prospered as a "blue" internationalist in an isolationist "red" state by endorsing his constituents' strongly held views on gun control and environmentalism—he was against the former and for the latter. But his own psychology came with a cost—a public image of him as a moralistic showboater. "He suffered from political ambition that was sometimes blinding. He was a publicity hound with a careful, studied speaking style that could make him seem pretentious and arrogant; he earned the nickname 'Senator Cathedral.'" (8)

While in the Senate, Church underwent a gradual political and ideological transformation. He started out as a conventional Cold War Democrat with vague domestic policy views but moved leftward in both areas. Fights over civil rights legislation and the Vietnam War turned him into an ardent liberal. He regretted voting for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution authorizing a US military buildup in Vietnam and pushed the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, William Fulbright, to hold public hearings that intensified opposition to the war. The Cooper-Church Amendment, which banned funding for US military forces in Laos and Thailand, made him a national figure, and he reveled in the attention he got for rebelling against a president of his own party. Contrarily, his disaffection toward the Washington establishment grew; Church wanted to be part of it by raising his official prominence, but he eschewed its social trappings and gained few friends among his legislative colleagues.

Although Church tried, his new-found fame did not translate into roles with the congressional Watergate inquiries because of his outsider status. Opportunely timed leaks of information about the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation's influence in

foreign countries gave him a public stage from which to investigate the hidden power of US corporations in world affairs. His inquiries into US multinational corporations' involvement with CIA's election intervention in Chile in 1970 and Lockheed's pervasive use of bribery to win overseas contracts drew backlash from senior senators who thought he was going too far, but he resisted their pressure to let up.

Church's relatively close re-election win in 1974 goaded him to consider a presidential run in 1976—complicated by his leadership of the select committee investigating the IC that began work in early 1975 after the Family Jewels disclosures.<sup>a</sup> His quandary highlighted his two sides—the reformer and the politician. "At the most important moment in his career, Church couldn't choose between the two, between his genuine moral outrage over the CIA's abuses and the growth of an American empire, and his own political ambitions. And so, in the most fateful decision of his career, he would try to do both: run what would become known to history as the Church Committee, and run for president." (167)

The 16 chapters covering the committee's work constitute the heart of the book. Not much new is revealed on the major topics the senators and the staffers examined—assassinations, Mafia plots to kill Fidel Castro, a very limited set of covert actions, the MKULTRA drug-testing program, the FBI's COINTELPRO attack against Martin Luther King, CIA and NSA domestic surveillance—but the Risens' treatment of them is useful for consolidating information about them in one place and providing well sketched portraits of some of the principals, especially Mafiosi Johnny Roselli and Sam Giancana (both mysteriously murdered during the committee's investigation). Church, who admired John F. Kennedy, had to tread carefully when Kennedy's relationship with Giancana lover Judith Exner emerged in the course of the Castro assassination plots investigation. Church's delicate treatment of the matter caused Republicans on the committee to complain that he was covering up for the Kennedy family.

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a. David Robarge, "Evolution of Surveillance Policy: US Intelligence, Domestic Surveillance, and the Time of Troubles," *Studies in Intelligence* 68, no. 2 (June 2024).

Interesting details appear about the inner workings of the committee's staff, notably the different personalities and agendas of staff director William Miller and committee counsel F.A.O. "Fritz" Schwarz and how they affected the Committee's work. Miller was "a genial, straitlaced former U.S. Foreign Service officer"; Schwarz was "a long-haired, aggressive New York lawyer." They "represented the two sides of Church's personality. Miller reflected the Frank Church who was a politician yearning for status and acceptance from the establishment. Schwarz represented the post-Vietnam Frank Church who was a radical eager to overturn the militaristic, imperialistic status quo." (182, 184) The two clashed almost immediately. Church sided with Schwarz. According to one staffer partial to Miller, the staff director "wanted to reform the [intelligence] community, point out some mistakes, and get to the bottom of the problems, but do it in a way that the intelligence community cooperated with. And Schwarz wanted to do it in a more adversarial way.... Schwarz managed to put on a good show, and that's exactly what Church wanted." (189)

Church's decision to focus initially on the CIA assassination plots antagonized the pro-Miller faction, but he ignored the critics, assigned a small unit with three committee members (John Tower, Gary Hart, and himself) and 15 staffers, led by Schwarz, to delve into them.<sup>a</sup> The result: "Schwarz's work with Church... ultimately solidified his control over the committee's staff, while Miller faded further into the background." (202) Church fended off White House resistance to publishing the assassination report and, without full Senate approval—he said none was needed—went ahead and released it.

The committee held no public hearings on the assassination plots or covert action operations. That put Church in a double bind: "When he held open hearings, the press said he was showboating to hype his possible run for the presidency. When he held closed hearings, pundits said he was engaged in a cover-up.... Unable to go public with the lurid tales uncovered in the assassination investigation, Frank Church and his staff scrambled to find another story that would capture the public's imagination and grab headlines

in the committee's first public hearing" scheduled for September 1975. (328) When they found out that the CIA had illegally kept a supply of shellfish toxin after President Nixon had ordered its destruction, they had their story. The result was the oft-depicted scene of some of the committee members handling the notorious dart gun—labeled an CIA assassination pistol although it was a US Army weapon used to disable sentry dogs, which the Risens do not mention.

Several other errors or unnuanced statements appear in these chapters about the committee. Counterintelligence chief James Angleton, whose testimony (later withdrawn) that "It is inconceivable that a secret intelligence arm of the government has to comply with all of the overt orders of the government" appalled Church, receives the usual stereotyped treatment as a paranoid alcoholic. Kim Philby was a penetration, not a double agent. CIA was not involved in coup plots against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. DCI Richard Helms's notes about the White House meeting on September 15, 1970, with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger about keeping Salvadore Allende from winning the October election in Chile—"One in 10 chance perhaps, but save Chile!...not concerned risks involved...make the economy scream"—are not mentioned even though they contradict the self-exonerating statements that Kissinger, Nixon, and Kissinger aide Alexander Haig made later. The 1973 coup in Chile was not "CIA-backed." Lastly, in its covert-action inquiry, the committee examined only a small set of regime-change operations, leaving the enduring impression that CIA's covert actions were all anti-democratic exercises in eliminating troublesome left-wing nationalists and protecting compliant pro-US dictators. A thorough review of CIA covert programs reveals exactly the opposite to be true: the overwhelming majority (upward of 90 percent) were intended to protect democratic governments or popular sovereignty where it was threatened and to promote anti-authoritarian movements in autocratic or totalitarian states.

In the end, Church had to recant his characterization of CIA as a "rogue elephant" and accept that it acted under presidential authorization, even if often vaguely

a. See David Robarge, "Interview with Former US Senator Gary Hart," *Studies in Intelligence* 65, no. 4 (December 2021).

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conveyed. As the committee wound down its work, Church spent less time with it and more on his presidential campaign. His late start irreparably hobbled it, however, and he never built sufficient momentum to win enough primaries to stymie Jimmy Carter. His pursuit of the White House “seemed like little more than a Church family vanity project.” (371) An effort to become Carter’s running mate failed awkwardly.

During Carter’s presidency, some of the reforms Church had worked for came to fruition: the standing oversight committees in the Senate and House, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court to oversee domestic surveillance, Carter’s executive order banning US involvement in foreign assassinations, and the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act outlawing bribery of foreign officials. Church also took the politically risky step of supporting the Panama Canal Treaty, much disliked in Idaho, but he believed it was vital to repairing the regional image of the United States as an imperialistic interloper. That upset the careful balance he had struck in the state’s politics. “We get just a little bit tired of hearing about your conscience,” said one letter to the editor in a local paper.” (393) Up for reelection in 1980, Church suffered from Idahoans’ disapproval of Carter, whereas Ronald Reagan’s popularity there helped Church’s opponent Steve Symms narrowly prevail. According to Symms, fellow Idahoan James Angleton encouraged him to run as

a way to get back at Church for damaging his own reputation and harming CIA.

Church left politics quietly, working for a Washington law firm and traveling with his wife, who had been his longtime political confidante. However, in early 1984 he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died that April. He was buried in Morris Hill Cemetery in Boise. Three years later when Angleton died, he also was buried there, about one hundred feet from Church.

*The Last Honest Man* is a valuable and very readable addition to the literature on congressional oversight of US intelligence. For further reading on the Church Committee, see:

- Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: Congress and Intelligence* (Dorsey Press, 1988)
- Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999)
- Frank J. Smist, Jr., *Congress Oversees the United States Intelligence Community, Second Edition, 1947–1994* (University of Tennessee Press, 1994)
- L. Britt Snider, *The Agency and the Hill: CIA’s Relationship with Congress, 1946–2004* (CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2008) ■