



Ben Plastino

Church exposed CIA tactics

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During the current Iran-Contra hearings occasional references are made to the "Church committee," which brought about restrictions on federal intelligence agencies.

It was Idaho Sen. Frank Church, a Democrat, the volatile chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who in 1975 headed the Select Committee on Intelligence that investigated abuses by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, D-Mont., at that time appointed Church to the committee of which he was elected chairman.

The abuses uncovered by the committee were sensational and front-page reading for months. It showed these agencies engaged in attempted assassination of foreign leaders, opened private mail and illegally spied on Americans, among other questionable practices.

Conservatives charged that Church's investigation weakened the CIA and diminished America's global power. Moderates hailed the revelations that brought changes to restrict these free-wheeling agencies.

Church exposed the CIA's unlawful spying on American citizens. He also shook the truth out of the FBI,

which had strayed far afield from proper law enforcement under the Bill of Rights. He played a major role in enacting the first civil rights bill, always favoring equality for women.

When Church announced for the presidency in the historic mining town of Idaho City March 19, 1976, he said, "The first priority of our political agenda is the restoration of the federal government to legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The vast majority of federal employees are honest, law-abiding citizens.

"But nobody — no matter how highly placed in government — has the right to break the law; to open our mail, to photograph our cables, to spread false propaganda for the purposes of discrediting. These illegal and indecent practices must stop. Runaway bureaucracy must be harnessed once more to reins of the law. For let it be remembered that, in America, the people are sovereign, and the government is their servant still."

Church fervently opposed the Vietnam war from the start in the 1960s, when it was not exactly popular to do so. He inaugurated what proved to be a decadelong battle in Congress to end the war, and it affirmed that Church was right in the first place.

Church also served as chairman of the Committee on Emergency Powers in 1973-76 which studied the growth of presidential emergency powers over the previous 40 years. He also headed the subcommittee on multinational corporations in 1975 which investigated the activities of the oil companies and other international corporations.

Church served in the U.S. Senate 24 years, 1957-80, the last two as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. After his loss to Republican Steve Symms by 4,200 votes of some 433,000 cast in 1980, he became associated with an international law firm at the nation's capital.

His absence from the Senate, however, was a devastating loss to Idaho and the nation.

After announcing for president in 1976, he defeated Jimmy Carter in a half-dozen states but ran out of campaign money and had to drop out of the race. Carter eventually won the nomination and presidency that year.

During President John Kennedy's administration, Church was a member of what was then considered the elite "Palace Guard," an inner select group of advisers.

Church's achievements were

extensive also in the field of the elderly, wilderness, conservation, environment, and agriculture.

At the time, in 1956, the 32-year-old Church was the youngest person ever to be elected to the Senate. He died at 59 April 7, 1984, from cancer of the pancreas.

Idaho's two staunch Republican senators, James A. McClure and Steve Symms, have viewed the Iran-Contra hearings with less than fervent enthusiasm.

McClure, a member of the committee, has said more important government matters should be considered. He said, with some justification, that the hearings are divulging too much of this government's covert foreign activities.

Symms, like many others, has labeled Lt. Col. Oliver North an "American hero."

The hearings reveal both Admiral John Poindexter and North engaged in admitted practices of deceit and lies which irreparably damaged the Reagan presidency.

It brings up the question of what has happened to the old-fashioned American creed of truth and honesty in government.

(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist)