

How the CIA Seduced Congress [Church and Pike Committees]

by Taylor Branch

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With all these surprises percolating, the most interesting surprise has been largely ignored. And that is how the CIA investigations ceased. The topic faded away so quickly as to make the whole episode look like a fad. Unlike the FBI issue, which has moved to the prosecutors' offices and stayed on the front page, the vaunted trial of the CIA has already become a memory. And the agency itself has survived the scandals with its covert operations intact, if not strengthened.

The collapse of the CIA investigations has been due largely to ineptitude, poor judgment and lack of will on the part of the congressional committees.

But the agency also played a role. Its strategy was flawless. "Those guys really knew what they were doing," says a staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Frank Church. "I think they defended themselves just like any other agency would, except they're better. They had a whole office set up to deal with us, and I sometimes had the feeling that they ran operations against us like they run them against foreign governments. It was like the CIA station for the Congress instead of for Greece or Vietnam."

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The agency began these searching investigations hanging on the ropes, and clearly emerged the winner. Its powers, so unique and still largely hidden, remain essentially unchallenged.