

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 554

26 March 2024

James Risen with Thomas Risen. *The Last Honest Man: The CIA, the FBI, the Mafia, and the Kennedys—and One Senator's Fight to Save Democracy*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2023. ISBN: 978-0316565134 (hardcover, \$32.00)

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E554>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Daniel R. Hart | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by John Linantud, University of Houston-Downtown

The Last Honest Man: The CIA, the FBI, the Mafia, and the Kennedys—and One Senator's Fight to Save Democracy is a political biography of US Senator Frank Church (1924–1984) and the most recent work on intelligence agencies by investigative journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner James Risen and his co-author and son, journalist Thomas Risen. Risen's primary argument is that the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities of 1975–1976, which is commonly referred to as the “Church Committee,” brought the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and National Security Agency (NSA) under the rule of law for the first time.

The introduction features a photograph of Senator Church with a dart gun at the Committee's first public hearing in September 1975. Church had learned that the CIA had refused an order by President Richard Nixon to destroy a cache of poison, and he hoped to develop this information into a virtual smoking gun to vindicate his suspicion that CIA had become a “rogue elephant” operating independently of the White House. Church originated that term in July 1975 after former presidential aide John Eisenhower testified that his father, President Dwight Eisenhower, did not inform him about assassination operations involving Cuba (238). The rogue elephant theory, writ large, is a primary theme of *Last Honest Man* regarding not only assassinations, but other lawless or abusive intelligence operations that could have remained unknown were it not for Church.

Part 1 of the book tracks Church prior to his work on the committee. Church spoke well, married into a connected family, and aspired to higher office while rejecting much of the conservatism of his home state of Idaho. Church declined a post in army intelligence after wartime service in China and was intrigued by Progressive presidential candidate Henry Wallace in 1948 (37). He was later upset to learn that the CIA was involved in the Idaho Crusade for Freedom, which he chaired in the 1950s (42).¹ In the 1956 senatorial elections Church benefited from a shady vote count in the Democratic primary, but he rejected a smear campaign against his Republican opponent in the general election (47). Church built a national profile during Senate Foreign Relations hearings on the Vietnam War in 1966 and initially aligned with political scientist Hans Morgenthau, a major figure in the realist school of international relations, who opposed the war as unnecessary for the national interest (79). Church then created bipartisan legislative amendments to restrict Vietnam operations, and chaired a subcommittee that investigated multinational corporations, in the early 1970s (110–116, 126–42).

¹ On the Crusade for Freedom, see Richard Cummings, *Radio Free Europe's “Crusade for Freedom”: Rallying Americans behind Cold War Broadcasting, 1950–1960* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010).

Part 2 revisits the Church committee, which was created in 1975 by a vote of 82-4 following a report by Seymour Hersh in *New York Times* about domestic CIA operations, mostly against US opponents of the Vietnam War (159-164). The White House and House of Representatives authorized separate investigations by the United States President's Commission on CIA Activities within the United States² and United States House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.³ Church and Vice Chair Senator John Tower led their committee until it expired in 1976. Church had strained relations with President Gerald Ford for the entirety of the investigation, but he secured written testimony from former President Richard Nixon (presidents Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had died) and subjected dozens of officials to closed and public hearings, including CIA Director William Colby, counterintelligence specialist James Angleton, and scientist Sidney Gottlieb (327-334, 270-283, 284-296). In response to these investigations, the White House issued executive orders that banned assassinations by the US government, both legislative houses created permanent intelligence committees, and Congress passed the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in 1977 and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act in 1978 (383-384).

Part 3 describes Church's unsuccessful presidential campaign in 1976 and his defeat in the 1980 Idaho Senate election. Church never resolved a lifelong proclivity to alienate fellow Democrats, in this case Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, who declined to select him as vice president. He remains the last Democrat senator from Idaho.

In the epilogue, Risen cites Vice President Dick Cheney's historic enmity towards the Church committee, and Republican Party investigations of intelligence agencies in 2023, as evidence of the Committee's positive legacy (400-404). Moreover, he notes that Wikileaks and NSA analyst Edward Snowden indicated that President Barack Obama "endorsed and extended" President George W. Bush's counterterrorism policies (404). The upshot is that Congress must remain vigilant.

Last Honest Man is an engrossing and expert history of Frank Church, the politics of Washington and the Vietnam War, intelligence operations in Congo, Cuba, and Chile, and the US, and the Church committee. Risen includes short chapters, photos, and block-quotes from Church. The bibliography lists over one hundred items, including secondary source books and academic reports. Reference notes include primary sources that enable the author to reestablish the work of the committee.

Risen writes for an experienced, savvy audience. But *The Last Honest Man* is also timely, adding valuable historic insight to contemporary culture and politics. The most important caveats, especially for casual and novice readers, involve labels that do not fit the overall tone of the book. In the introduction and epilogue, Risen does not define, but dismisses, the "deep state," a concept most associated with supporters of Donald Trump who believe that federal agencies subverted Trump and his policies, as a "right-wing conspiracy theory" (12, 404). Risen should have invested more time evaluating the "deep state" as part of today's political climate. Many Americans, including current independent candidate for president Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., endorse the maximal rogue elephant theory that the CIA itself played a role in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963.⁴ In addition, the six-decade drop in trust in government has not abated as the nation stumbles toward the 2024 election.⁵

Risen's account of the failed 1967 recall against Church in Idaho also includes unclear labeling. The author places Church's opponents on the "right," but does not use the word "left" to place Church. Instead, here

² Created in 1975 by President Gerald Ford, this commission was known as the Rockefeller Commission after its chairman, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.

³ Created in 1975, the committee was chaired by Democratic Representative Otis G. Pike of New York.

⁴ Peter Baker, "Biden's 'Final' Order on Kennedy Files Leaves Some Still Wanting More," *New York Times*, 16 July 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/16/us/politics/biden-jfk-assassination-papers.html>.

⁵ Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023," 19 September 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/>

and throughout the book, Risen describes Church as “radical,” especially on foreign policy (85-91). The problem with using the word “radical” is that readers may equate Church with more extreme groups that also emerged in response to the war. By the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, which Church did not attend, some Vietnam War demonstrators identified as Marxist revolutionaries, not Democrats, and carried the red, blue, and gold-starred flag of the Vietnam National Liberation Front and Viet Cong guerillas fighting against South Vietnam and its allies, including the US. If Church did not identify with the Viet Cong, then he was not that radical compared to such demonstrators who also wanted to influence the party and foreign policy.⁶

A strength of *Last Honest Man* is that Risen establishes the presidential ambitions, and mutual distrust and contempt, between Church and notables like Lyndon Johnson, Senator William Fulbright, CIA director Richard Helms, committee staffer Barbara Banoff, who worked with Senator Walter Mondale, and President Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski. In the early 1970s, Church became an adherent of Dependency, which at the time was a novel, structural-materialist theory originating in Latin America that argued dependence on rich nations kept developing countries poor and authoritarian (85, 119, 147-148).⁷ Church accordingly suspected that ITT, an American multinational corporation, had overly influenced US policy on Chile. He pursued this as chair of the Subcommittee on Multinational Corporations and developed information about bribes and contributions to a CIA slush fund. ITT later cooperated with the Church committee (280). All this recalls the dictum that politicians need not be angels to make checks and balances work and indicates Church’s ambitions and contrarian views served the nation well at that point in time.

Church and other investigators changed history by creating and developing new knowledge about CIA assassination plots overseas. But the most sensational case, then and now, was within the US. Over several chapters, including one titled “Who will rid me of this man?” and another “What the president wanted to happen” Risen provides information for readers to evaluate the politics and evidence associated with the CIA as rogue elephant theory. He, however, doubts Church’s private commitment to the committee’s 1975 report, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, which found that the CIA operated with the knowledge of the White House in Congo, Cuba, Dominican Republic, South Vietnam, and Chile.⁸ Risen endorses this conclusion (267).

Lindsey O’Rourke used a more deductive methodology to evaluate the rogue elephant theory. O’Rourke built an original database of several dozen covert US regime change operations during the Cold War in Europe, the Soviet Union, and developing countries. She writes the CIA “never proceeded without some form of presidential approval.”⁹ O’Rourke’s research also dilutes the roguishness of assassinations by placing them into a much larger and complicated context than was previously known. The CIA intervened against both allied and hostile governments, and against elected and unelected leaders, depending on how policymakers defined the national interest. Many operations failed. Given the importance of CIA Director William Colby to Frank Church, it should be noted that his son, Carl, produced a documentary *The Man Nobody Knew* (2011) which follows Colby as a field agent on different Cold War missions, starting with building the Christian Democracy Party in Italy in the 1940s as an alternative to communism. In South Vietnam Colby worked with

⁶ For a photograph of demonstrators with the Viet Cong flag, see Lee Hudson, “Looking back at the 1968 Democratic National Convention,” *Politico*, 11 April 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/04/11/looking-back-at-the-1968-democratic-national-convention-00091441>. See also Luke A. Nichter, *The Year That Broke Politics: Collusion and Chaos in the Presidential Election of 1968* (Yale University Press, 2023), 123-39; and Bryan Burrough, *Days of Rage: America’s Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

⁷ *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Development Theory,” article contributor Sandra Halperin, accessed 18 November 2023, <https://academic-eb-com.uhd.idm.oclc.org/levels/collegiate/article/development-theory/600895#article-contributors>.

⁸ United States Senate, Select Subcommittee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1975).

⁹ Lindsey A. O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 34.

President Ngo Dinh Diem, but left the country before Diem was assassinated by mutinous generals in 1963. Colby returned to South Vietnam and directed the counterinsurgent Phoenix program in the late 1960s, and later testified to the Church committee as CIA director.¹⁰

Risen uses primary sources to create a matter-of-fact portrait of Kennedy, whom Church admired, and to revisit how Church dealt with unwanted information about Kennedy's intrigues with the CIA and the mafia. Church initially assumed that he would spend most of his time on the disgraced President Nixon, who resigned in 1974. If so, then his most honest decision was to research Kennedy's failed plots against Cuban President Fidel Castro. After Church suggested the CIA could have acted without Kennedy's authority or knowledge, Republican Senator Barry Goldwater disagreed and accused Church of trying to protect the late Kennedy (238-240). In terms of historical controversies, Risen inveighs against the idea that Judith Campbell, who allegedly had affairs with Kennedy and mafia boss Sam Giancana, passed messages between Kennedy and Giancana, but discusses the murders of Giancana in 1975 and his associate Johnny Rosselli in 1976, both of whom worked with Kennedy on the Castro plots and testified to the committee. Another Church Committee witness, Orlando Letelier of Chile, was murdered in 1976 (218-223, 360-367, 262-263).

Page | 4

Risen also relies upon primary sources to revisit the psychological warfare campaign by the FBI against Martin Luther King, who Hoover suspected was manipulated by two aides with ties to the American Communist Party. Hoover's aide, William Sullivan, testified to the committee (306). In 1964, FBI surveillance of King escalated from wiretaps to audio recordings, with a concerted effort to record King's extramarital affairs. The FBI mailed recordings anonymously to King along with a letter that Risen argues urged King to take his own life (316). The FBI later used media contacts to pressure King to stay at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, where he was killed in April 1968. Risen reports that Church did not hold the FBI responsible for King's decision to stay at the Lorraine (318). He then turns to the death of Black Panther Fred Hampton in 1969. Based on media reports, Risen concludes that "Chicago police had carried out an execution of Fred Hampton under the direction of the FBI" (321).¹¹

Risen includes Church's post-Church Committee career. On the 1976 campaign trail Church stated that "our tragedy in recent years springs from a leadership principally motivated by fear" that had "little faith" in the ability of US democracy to weather political dissent without adopting Soviet-like policies (371-372). In 1984, months before he died, Church argued that "it is this idea that the communist threat is everywhere that has made our government its captive and its victim" (397). Yet Church was prone to speaking of war as a Manichean variable, and he never abandoned the idea that constant war and imperialism were transforming the federal government into a lawless, authoritarian state.

It is more realistic to treat threats, war, and democracy as complex variables, and to identify what *parts* of democracy are more vulnerable to national security pressures. Church's own fame reflected such complications. Eisenhower compelled the truce that ended the Korean War in 1953 by making nuclear threats against China, believing that the Soviet Union would not retaliate if the US followed through on its threat.¹² He and his successors thought that covert operations would avoid similar risks. As Vietnam escalated in the mid-1960s, Church took an antiwar path that led to him to expose covert actions that were supposed to prevent wars like Vietnam.

¹⁰ Carl Colby, dir. *The Man Nobody Knew* (New York: Act 4 Entertainment, 2011).

¹¹ Beverly Gage does not hold J. Edgar Hoover directly responsible for the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Hampton. She does however argue that Hoover created a "moral climate" that enabled the assassination of King, and that Hoover made Hampton's death "possible" by directing agents to weaken the Black Panther Party and cooperate with Chicago police. Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Viking, 2022), 667, 691.

¹² Michael Gordon Jackson, "Beyond Brinkmanship: Eisenhower, Nuclear War Fighting, and Korea, 1953-1968," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35:1 (2005): 52-75, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552659>.

Miriam Elman used comparative-historical methodology to challenge the larger proposition that war inevitably threatens democracy. In Israel, a looming conflict of survival in 1947–1948 forestalled civil war among rival factions, and compelled elites to create a unified army and to centralize political authority, without sacrificing parliamentary government. In the US, by 1787 encroachments by Britain and other countries on national territory had convinced elites to create a new constitution and stronger national executive within a democratic electoral framework.¹³ Likewise, during the Cold War, the two-party system and biennial elections were not in jeopardy. Rather, the parts of democracy that Church helped preserve were the rule of law, checks and balances, and the ability to investigate government surveillance and abuse of dissidents, political leaders, and ordinary citizens.

Risen has produced a strongly argued and detailed history of the conflict between Frank Church and intelligence agencies. The most alarming part of this history is *how unexpected* the Church revelations were at the time. *Last Honest Man* thus reflects and reinforces the healthy skepticism of power that has always been part of American politics.

John Linantud is a Professor and Coordinator of Political Science at the University of Houston Downtown. Recent journal articles include Joanna Kaftan and John Linantud, “Ideologies and Competition: Student Reflections on Their Statecraft Experience,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 17:1 (2021): 169-184, and Linantud and Kaftan, “The Statecraft Effect: Assessment, Attitudes, and Academic Honesty,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 15:1 (2019): 64-81.

¹³ Miriam Fendius Elman, “Deciding Democracy: External Security Threats and Domestic Regime Choices,” in Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, eds, *Existential Threats and Civil-Security Relations* (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), 81-117.