

Senator Mathias: An Appreciation

By Max Holland

When [Charles Mathias](#) passed away on January 25, his death generated the kind of coverage one would predict for a three-term senator who was long a favorite of the mainstream Washington media. In addition to the obligatory coverage in his home state of Maryland, there were lengthy obituaries in [The Washington Post](#) and [The New York Times](#), and both newspapers also noted his death in [editorials](#), a sure sign of respect given their shrinkage.

The eulogies recounted Mathias's positions on a slew of issues—civil rights, Vietnam, Supreme Court nominations, campaign finance reform—that put him at odds with either his party or the White House incumbent, and sometimes both. Curiously, however, none of the articles mentioned his service in 1975-76 on the Senate Select Committee to Study Intelligence Activities, more commonly known as the Church Committee. Nothing Mathias did in his 34 years of public service was more revealing of the man's integrity and decency than his performance during this probe, which Mathias had been instrumental in bringing about.[\[1\]](#)

In hindsight, and save for dissent over US involvement in Vietnam, no single event reflected the breakdown of the cold war consensus more than the Congressional investigations into the intelligence community in the mid 1970s. Unlike the controversy over the war, however, the season of inquiry on Capitol Hill threatened to do great and lasting damage to a cold war instrumentality that almost everyone recognized as necessary. One could argue that if the war's critics were heeded, and Washington extricated itself from Vietnam, the United States would actually emerge in a better position to wage its policy of containment versus the Soviet Union. In contrast, few people were making the argument that the congressional investigations would lead to better intelligence. All the talk was in terms of exposing alleged wrong-doing and bringing the community—chiefly the CIA and FBI—to heel.

Few senators emerged from serving on the Church Committee with their reputations enhanced. The chairman, [Frank Church](#) (D-Idaho), earned the permanent enmity of many intelligence officers once they perceived his primary interest lay in how he might exploit the high-profile investigation to further his presidential ambitions. Senator [Richard Schweiker](#) (R-Pennsylvania) looked foolish once his bold prediction of October 1975—namely, that the Warren Report was going to collapse like a house of cards—failed to materialize. And Senator [Gary Hart](#) (D-Colorado), who worked with Schweiker on the

committee's special probe into the performance of the intelligence agencies after the JFK assassination, also did his reputation no favor with the claim that he and Schweiker were hot on the trail of the real assassin(s) but they ran out of time. If only he had been elected president in the 1980s, Hart subsequently asserted, he would have picked up where he left off and solved the supposed mystery.

Mathias was a marked exception to these sorry performances. In contrast to most of his colleagues, Mathias's primary interest was finding out and understanding what had happened, rather than figuring out how the investigation might be turned to political advantage (though Mathias, too, toyed with the idea of running for higher office in the midst of the investigation).^[2] The best illustration of Mathias's approach occurred on June 13, 1975, [Richard Helms's](#) first day of classified testimony before the committee.

"Plausible deniability" was already part of the public discourse when the former CIA director showed up to testify in executive session in Room S 407 of the Capitol. Under this practice, the CIA carried out covert actions authorized by the president, but the exact order to do so could not be traced to the Oval Office. Above all, there was no paper trail. The practice was not designed to allow the CIA to run its own foreign policy, unbeknownst to the president. Rather, it was a ruse designed to fool everyone not privy to decisions made in the Oval Office.

On June 13, however, and for months to come, Helms would find senators on the Church Committee acting as if the practice were beyond their ken. As Thomas Powers later chronicled in *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*, the senators kept "coming back to the question of who authorized the CIA's unsuccessful attempts to arrange the assassination of Fidel Castro."

Helms felt that the senators on Church's committee were pretending for purely political reasons not to know this [i.e., that the CIA did what the president wanted done]. Their questions seemed to him aimed purely at the public record. [They] kept asking how the CIA could undertake such monstrous acts without explicit authority. Where are the orders? they wanted to know. Where is the piece of paper which says, Do it? More than once Helms found himself with an almost irresistible urge to fire back: Senator, how can you be so god-damned dumb? You don't put an order like that in *writing*."^[3]

Mathias was one of the few senators who did not grandstand, or attempt to trap or browbeat Helms into divulging the details of his marching orders. Rather, the Maryland senator sought to understand and illuminate, which led to one of the investigation's most notable exchanges.

Mathias: When [former CIA Deputy Director] [Richard Bissell](#) was here I think I asked him whether the job of communicating with superior authority was one of protecting superior authority—and specifically, the president—protecting him from knowledge and at the same time

informing him, which is a difficult and delicate job, and he [Bissell] agreed that that was really the difficulty.

And you this morning have said that in advising a president, or very high authority of any particular delicate subject, that [one] resort [you] had [was] euphemism. . . . Did presidents indulge in euphemisms as well as [CIA] directors?

Helms: I don't know. I found in my experience that presidents used the entire range of the English language, from euphemisms on the one extreme to very explicit talk on the other.

Mathias: Let me draw an example from history. When [Thomas á Becket](#) was proving to be an annoyance, as Castro [was], the King said, Who will rid me of this man? He didn't say to somebody, Go out and murder him. He said, Who will rid me of this man, and let it go at that. Does that kind of—

Helms: That is a warming reference to the problem.

Mathias: You feel that spans the generations and the centuries?

Helms: I think it does, sir.

Mathias: And that is typical of the kind of thing which might be said, which might be taken by the director or by anybody else, as presidential authorization to go forward?

Helms: That is right I think that any of us would have found it very difficult to discuss assassinations with a president of the United States. I just think we all had the feeling that we were hired out to keep those things out of the Oval Office.

Mathias: And yet at the same time you felt that some spark had been transmitted, that that was within the permissible limits?

Helms: Yes. And if he [Castro] had disappeared from the scene they would not have been unhappy.[\[4\]](#)

Within days of Helms's June 13 appearance, members of the Church Committee—with the exception of Mathias—began leaking to the press their own, invariably partisan views on the matter. Since most of the controversy was about what happened during the Kennedy administration, committee Republicans tended to assert the evidence gathered so far showed the CIA “took orders from the top,” while Democrats countered that there

was no evidence linking officials outside the agency to assassination plots. The dueling statements culminated with Frank Church's headline-making remark of July 18: "The CIA may have been behaving like a rogue elephant on a rampage."^[5] That observation would, unfortunately, prove at least as durable as the committee's final report, which made no such claim when ultimately issued in April 1976.

In January 1999, when I interviewed Charles Mathias about the Church Committee's investigation, he was taciturn and clearly reluctant to criticize his former colleagues, most notably Frank Church. But it seems clear that but for members like Mathias, the committee might have become a debacle like its House counterpart, the Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Representative [Otis Pike](#) (D-New York). In Helms's memoir, he credits Mathias as being one of the two senators who "struggled to keep the committee on focus and to avoid the most serious, and often gratuitous, security compromises. Their good counsel and cautions were persistently overridden by the enthusiasm that some of the others had for making headlines with the data supplied by CIA"^[6]

When Helms was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in November 2002, much was made of the old and current spymasters who turned out, along with many former Executive Branch officials.^[7] There may have been some members of Congress there, too, but I recognized only one, and certainly he was the only member of the Church Committee who came to pay his respects: Charles Mathias.

[1] In October 1974, Mathias, together with [Mike Mansfield](#) (D-Montana), then the majority leader, were the first senators to propose the creation of a Select Committee on Intelligence Activities.

[2] Donald P. Baker, "[Mathias Says He May Run in Presidential Primaries](#)," *Washington Post*, 9 November 1975.

[3] Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 119. Later, in a memoir he wrote somewhat reluctantly, Helms would recall, "Time surely heals many wounds and often softens judgments. That said, it remains my opinion that Senator Church operated his committee at a level of self-serving hypocrisy unusual even for other run-of-the-mill presidential hopefuls. For his own purposes, Church affected to assume that CIA ran most of its sensitive operations on its own initiative and authority, and without the president's knowledge." Richard Helms with William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003), 437.

[4] Transcript of Hearing Held before the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, [13 June 1975](#), courtesy of the Mary Ferrell Foundation.

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[5] Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: The Senate Intelligence Investigation* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 57-58; Robert L. Jackson, "[No Presidential Role Found in CIA Plots](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 1975.

[6] Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 430. The other senator Helms credited was John Tower (R-Texas).

[7] Dana Priest, "[The Agency's Farewell](#)," *Washington Post*, 21 November 2002.