

BRIA

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In 1936, political strife in Spain erupted in street clashes between right-wing and left-wing forces, like this one in the capital of Madrid.

The Spanish Civil War: Prelude to World War

The Spanish Civil War was a pivotal moment in 20th-century history. It was a conflict that resonated far beyond the borders of Spain. The international involvement of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and the violent collision of the forces of fascism, nationalism, communism, and democracy, set the stage for World War II and foreshadowed other conflicts in the modern world.

Road to Civil War

Before the Spanish Civil War, Spain was a firmly traditional country. Spain's society was mainly rural,

and its economy was overwhelmingly agricultural. Most Spaniards were poor farmers, but Spain was run by wealthy landowners, the Catholic Church, and the military.

In other words, aside from a few industrial cities on the east coast, Spain in the early 1900s seemed like a country of the 1700s, untouched by the modernizations of the French Revolution and Industrial Revolution. Some reform groups attempted to challenge Spain's traditional structure, but the conservative alliance of landowners, the Church, and the military repeatedly succeeded in suppressing reform.

FASCISM

Fascism is an extreme nationalist ideology premised on fantasies of national rebirth and glory. Fascism despises democracy and communism equally and celebrates dictatorship and state violence. This violence manifests both inside the country, with hostile attacks on social outsiders, and outside the country, with aggressive wars of conquest. Fascism most notably gained power in Italy under Benito Mussolini and in Germany under Adolf Hitler.

While Spain's Nationalists did not call themselves fascists, they collaborated with the Italian and German fascists and shared many of the same goals. They relied on Spain's fascist party, "the Falange," as an essential segment of their coalition, and Francisco Franco even kept a framed picture of Adolf Hitler on his desk.

After a series of short-lived governments, however, Spain established a new democracy in 1931. A coalition of liberals, promising sweeping reforms, won the first elections in this "Second Republic." Once in power, they curtailed the power of the Catholic Church, granted more regional autonomy, and gave women the right to vote and initiate divorce. They also tried to help Spain's masses of impoverished peasants and workers. When the liberals won again in 1936, it seemed that Spain had upheld the reform program. To Spain's conservatives, this was not a reason to accept the democratic process, but a reason to destroy it.

On July 17, 1936, a group of Spanish army officers based in the Spanish colony of Morocco attempted to stage a coup d'état, or a rapid overthrow of the government. Led by General Francisco Franco, they aimed to eliminate Spain's democracy and restore Spain's traditional order.

Spain's conservative alliance took shape as it had for decades before, with landowners and the Catholic Church generally supporting the army rebellion. This time, the conservative alliance had a new element as well: fascist volunteers joining in the hundreds of thousands.

Coup d'états are typically swift, but in the days and weeks after the coup, the rebellion settled into a stalemate. The conservative rebels seized roughly half of Spain, while the democratic government and its allies maintained control in the other half. The coup became a civil war.

Nationalist Spain

Those who supported the military rebellion were called Nationalists. The Nationalists held Spain's agricultural north and center, as well as the southwest, close to where the army officers launched their rebellion in Morocco.

In the Nationalist zone, the military leaders built an

authoritarian regime with Franco as dictator. At the forefront of the Nationalists' rhetoric was their hatred of communism and promotion of the Catholic Church. They feared that liberal reforms were merely a gateway to a communist revolution and a godless society. Indeed, the liberal coalition included many communists and had support from the communist Soviet Union. Many who opposed the Nationalist coalition, especially anarchists and communists, committed significant violence against Catholic clergy.

The Nationalist regime promptly enforced a return to Spain's traditional order. The Catholic Church retook its central place in society. Women resumed their subordinate social role. The upper classes kept their wealth and power. Democratic elections were permanently canceled.

In an effort to solidify their power and punish the liberals' dreams of reform, the Nationalists also unleashed a furious campaign of repression against their opponents. This campaign, known as the White Terror, aimed to cleanse Spain of liberal ideas entirely.

Across Nationalist Spain, suspected liberals were tortured and killed en masse. Victims included politicians, workers, peasants, and "new women" who seemed to break from traditional gender roles. The White Terror killed perhaps two hundred thousand people and was explicitly orchestrated by the Nationalist leadership.

Early in the war, when Franco told an American reporter that he intended to "save Spain from communism whatever the cost," the reporter asked, "What if that means shooting half of Spain?" Franco replied, "As I said, whatever the cost."

Republican Spain

Those who supported the democratic government were called Republicans. The Republicans held the capital city of Madrid, the industrial cities of the east,



the culturally distinct regions of Catalonia and the Basque country, and the agricultural regions of the south.

The Republican side grew out of the wide coalition of liberal reformers that won the 1936 election. However, their diversity of ideas meant that it was virtually impossible to achieve the same level of unity as the Nationalists. While at first the Republican side was led by centrist democrats and moderate socialists, more radical elements gained influence as the war escalated. Hundreds of thousands joined the anarchists and communists. The Republic continued to pursue its reforms but struggled to exercise control of its diverse factions.

In some areas, order broke down entirely. Union leaders seized ownership of farms and factories, and they began operating them as self-managed cooperatives. Anarchists, who aim for the complete abolition of government, found themselves in charge of governing. Communists, who demanded an authoritarian revolution, forbade all revolutionary activity in order to focus on fighting the Nationalists. In one extreme case of disorder in May of 1937, moderates and communists fought anarchists for control of Barcelona.

The breakdown of order in some areas of the Republican zone also produced a horrific outburst of violence called the Red Terror. Republicans sought out Nationalist supporters and large landowners, seized their property, and killed them. Some Republicans even burned churches and murdered priests and nuns. The total death toll of the Red Terror was perhaps 40,000 victims, including over 6,000 clergy.

As shocking as this violence was, however, it was not equivalent to the violence in the Nationalist zone. The Nationalist zone's violence was centrally coordinated and lasted years. The scale of the killings in the Republican zone was smaller, and the violence was generally limited to the early weeks of the war. In stark contrast to the Nationalist government, the Republican government discouraged the killings.

Overall, despite the disturbing disorder, the Republicans tried their best to fight the Nationalists



together. While their internal division was not helpful, it also was not the main reason the Republicans lost the Spanish Civil War. They lost primarily due to the sharp imbalance of international support, which left them fighting an international fascist alliance alone.

Civil War

The fighting in the Spanish Civil War was unlike any previous war in history. Previewing the dynamic and ruinous combat to come in World War II, the Spanish Civil War featured the first ever airlifts of soldiers and aerial bombings of cities, and staggering violence against civilians.

In a war like this, victory was impossible without modern guns, ships, and airplanes. From the outset of the war, the Republicans struggled to obtain these supplies. The world's other democracies, including Britain, France, and the United States, were committed to a policy of "non-intervention," which meant refusing to intervene in any foreign war. The goal of the policy was to avoid another world war. The United States itself had passed Neutrality Acts to prevent the U.S. from involving itself in foreign wars while it tried to recover from the Great Depression.

These other democracies were also fearful of communism, and part of the Republican coalition were communists. Soviet Union support for the Republican



These are Americans who volunteered to fight the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. About 35,000 foreign volunteers fought for the Republican side, mostly from France, but about 2,800 came from the United States.

side made aid challenging for Western democracies. They did not want to strengthen the Soviet Union through a perceived alliance. The effect of non-intervention was a total inability for the Republic to make alliances or even purchase supplies.

Around 35,000 volunteers traveled from around the world to fight against fascism in Spain, but this wasn't enough for a government in desperate need of formal support. Aside from modest aid from the communist Soviet Union, the Spanish Republic was utterly alone.

The Nationalists, on the other hand, enjoyed outsized support. The fascist dictatorships in Italy and Germany saw the Spanish Nationalists as part of their international fight against democracy and communism, so they committed to helping the Nationalists defeat the Republic.

When the Nationalist coup of July 1936 required the first ever airlift of soldiers in history, Italian and German planes carried Franco's army from Morocco to Spain. When the Nationalist terror campaign launched the world's first major aerial bombing raids, the Italian and German air forces executed the raids. Most infamously, the Italian and German air forces razed the Republican town of Guernica with forty tons of incendiary bombs on April 26, 1937.

The Republicans continued to fight bravely against the Nationalists, but the Franco-Mussolini-Hitler alliance was too strong to defeat without allies or supplies. By 1939, the war was lost. Hitler, with a military well-seasoned through its experience in Spain, shifted his focus eastward and invaded Poland just a few months later.

Legacy

In Spain, the civil war resulted in decades of violent dictatorship, ending only with Franco's death in 1975. The White Terror continued for years after the war had ended, with millions facing persecution for supporting the Republicans during the war.

Even today, the war's wounds remain. The families of Republican victims have only begun to discuss and memorialize their relatives in recent decades, and Franco's body was only removed from its triumphant mausoleum in 2019 after tense public debate.

While public attention has tended to overlook the Spanish Civil War as a footnote to World War II, historians view the Spanish Civil War as a microcosm for understanding the decade of war that followed it. Both the Spanish Civil War's bitter ideological conflicts and its appalling carnage set a macabre template that World War II expanded.

In the end, the Spanish Civil War underscored how *not* to defend a democracy against an authoritarian threat. The divisions among Spain's democratic factions and the unwillingness of other democratic powers to aid the Spanish Republic left it unable to overcome the aggressive intervention of the Italian and German fascists on behalf of the Spanish Nationalists. Despite the best efforts of democratic fighters from Spain and around the world, democracy in Spain was doomed for generations.

Writing & Discussion

1. What sorts of people and ideologies comprised the Nationalist side during the Spanish Civil War? What sorts of people and ideologies comprised the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War?
2. How did the Republican "Red Terror" differ from the Nationalist "White Terror?"
3. What were the main reasons that the Nationalist side won the Spanish Civil War?
4. Do you think the Republican side was right to view the Nationalists as fascists? Do you think the Nationalist side was right to view the Republicans as communists?

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General Francisco Franco (right) watches a parade with the future King of Spain Prince Juan Carlos de Bourbon in 1969.

ACTIVITY:

In this activity, students will stage a hypothetical conference of international democratic leaders during the Spanish Civil War. Note: While doing this activity, remember that democratic leaders at the time knew Hitler and other fascists were arming themselves and were a threat to global security, but they did not know World War II was inevitable.

Divide the class into two groups. One group will represent the democratic leaders in favor of aiding the Spanish Republic, while the other will represent the democratic leaders opposed to aiding the Spanish Republic.

Give students about ten minutes to prepare a brief speech in support of their assigned position. Their speech should include a clear thesis statement as well as information from the reading in support of the thesis.

Allow one representative from each group to stand up and share their group's speech.

Encourage an open discussion between the two groups, with other students sharing additional reasons to support their side.

Conclude by discussing students' personal answers to the following questions:

- Were the world's democracies right to withhold aid from Republican Spain? Which side would you support if this were a real political conference?
- Are there any similar examples today, in which the United States has to decide whether to aid a democratic government under threat? If so, where? Which course of action do you think the U.S. should pursue?



BRICS and the 21st Century World Economy



At the end of the Cold War in 1991, the United States emerged as the victor over its longtime rival the Soviet Union. For the following few decades, America enjoyed economic hegemony, or dominance, across the globe, combined with its military prowess. Today, America's dominance is being challenged by the establishment of a new alternative economic power, the BRICS (named for its original member states: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

The BRICS has positioned itself as an alternative to

the economic order that emerged after World War II, when the United States and its European allies played a leading role in establishing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Those institutions sought to foster international stability by helping governments develop their capacity to implement sound economic policies, offering loans and other financial assistance.

By contrast, the Soviet Union established a highly centralized economic system that forced its various republics to rely on Moscow, the Soviet Union's capital,

Key Terms

hegemony (n.) – the power and influence of one country or group of countries over others, especially through a strong economy, military strength, or a culture that others want to copy.

multipolar (adj.) – when there are several superpowers (very powerful countries) that compete with each other for power over what happens in the world.

unipolar (adj.) – when there's one superpower (like a big country) that's much stronger than all the others economically and militarily.

for budget allotments and direction on how to allocate the money that was disbursed to them. As a result, these republics did not develop a significant private sector, and their people had little to no say in how budgets were prioritized and spent.

At the same time, the model espoused by most of the world’s Western countries was heavily reliant on the United States, which has always been the major shareholder of the IMF and World Bank. The World Bank president was also chosen by the United States.

America’s dominance of these institutions carried over into the post-Cold War era, when the United States and European Union worked together to rebuild the economies of the former Soviet republics. This effort had mixed success. While the United States and its allies focused on shaping the post-Cold War world, China and India, along with other “middle income” countries at the time, quietly invested in their own economies.

China’s Growing Influence

In 2005, a consortium of World Bank member countries predicted that, within ten years, China and India would wield global influence on par with the size of their populations. Combined, the countries accounted for nearly 40 percent of the world’s inhabitants, and their rapid industrialization, the consortium members said, was already apparent in their shifting relationship with the World Bank itself.

The Bank maintained “Country Assistance Strategies” — which positioned governments as aid recipients, rather than partners — with other developing countries. China’s relationship with the World Bank, however, was known as a “Country Partnership Agreement.” Rather than dictating what China had to do to develop its economy, that agreement set out goals for mutual cooperation between China and the World Bank. In other words, the Bank needed China as much as China needed it.

As America fought major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, China continued to grow its influence worldwide, putting in place plans for what it called its “belt and road initiative,” a massive infrastructure program that seeks to extend across the globe. Included in the initiative is extensive engagement with countries across Africa, where China’s access to valuable minerals, including those used in mobile phone and electric vehicle batteries, has grown steadily. Much of China’s influence in African countries is

BRICS MEMBERSHIP 2024

Members	Membership Year
Federative Republic of Brazil	2006
Russian Federation	2006
Republic of India	2006
People’s Republic of China	2006
Republic of South Africa	2010
Arab Republic of Egypt	2024
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia	2024
Islamic Republic of Iran	2024
United Arab Emerites	2024
Applying for Membership	Application Year
People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria	2022
Kingdom of Bahrain	2023
People’s Republic of Bangladesh	2023
Republic of Belarus	2023
Plurinational State of Bolivia	2023
Republic of Cuba	2023
Republic of Kazakhstan	2023
State of Kuwait	2023
State of Palestine	2023
Republic of Senegal	2023
Kingdom of Thailand	2023
Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela	2023
Socialist Republic of Vietnam	2023

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connected to loans it extends for infrastructure projects like roads, airports, and transportation systems.

The United States government has criticized China’s loans for creating a “debt trap” in African countries. But African leaders like Kenyan President William Ruto have insisted that the accusation is a “myth” and called it “offensive and condescending.” Already, however, African countries are falling behind on repaying their loans from China. In 2020, Zambia defaulted on its debt, and in 2023, it had to renegotiate the terms of its loans from China.





The New Development Bank was founded by BRICS in 2014. Pictured here is the bank's headquarters in Shanghai, China.

The Emerging BRICS

Building on this influence, China, along with other emerging powers, has sought to forge a new alliance of like-minded countries to challenge the economic might of the United States and institutions like the World Bank. The BRICS, a group of countries brought together by Russia and named after its original members — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and, later, South Africa — is one such alliance. Accounting for 40 percent of the world's population and one-quarter of the global economy, the group invited Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to join in 2023.

With many more countries expressing interest, the BRICS is already re-shaping the global economic order. Power seems to have shifted in the early 21st century from a unipolar order in which the U.S. is the center of global economic and military power, to a multipolar

order in which the U.S., China, Russia, and potentially others become competing centers of power.

On December 8, 2023, for example, the group announced that the UAE had asked fellow BRICS members to purchase oil from the country in their local currencies, not the U.S. dollar. This “de-dollarization” is important because it means that countries will no longer have to convert their currency to dollars — the price of which can fluctuate based on external factors like war and climate crises — before purchasing commodities that are vital to their economic development.

In 2014, the BRICS established its own alternative to the World Bank. Known now as the New Development Bank, it has already issued loans to BRICS members Brazil and China and has begun financing development projects to non-BRICS countries like Bangladesh.

This new bank has encouraged other countries, including traditional American allies, to forge partnerships with BRICS countries, explicitly challenging American hegemony. In April 2023, France's President Emmanuel Macron, after meeting with his Chinese counterpart, told reporters that Europe must resist pressure to become “America's followers.” This was an extraordinary statement coming from a NATO member, especially in the midst of the American-backed war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022. U.S. President Joe Biden had framed the war as a threat to the North Atlantic alliance.

Multipolarity and World Stability

With Russia poised to potentially retake one of its former Soviet republics in Ukraine, China and its BRICS partners relying less on American economic might, and population growth tilting heavily toward developing countries, the unipolar world of the post-Cold War era seems to be giving way to a new global order. Unlike the Cold War era, however, this new order is no longer limited to two superpowers. Instead, it appears to be forming around economic alliances that seek to break free from American influence. That influence remains strong, with the U.S. continuing to boast the world's largest economy and dominating institutions like the World Bank. But as the BRICS's New Development Bank has shown, some of that U.S. influence may be waning.

From the U.S. perspective, this new multipolar reality may limit its ability to impose order in places like Iraq, where conflicts can threaten American access to oil and other resources. Decreasing U.S. power, as well, could further embolden the authoritarian governments of

America's chief economic rivals, Russia and China. We have seen the conflict Russia began in Ukraine, and we may yet see China similarly act in neighboring Taiwan.

Many argue, though, that a multipolar order represented by the BRICS will offer developing countries a choice and, with it, a sense of agency. As these countries continue to grapple with poverty, food insecurity, and the looming threats of climate change, having more opportunities to access much-needed capital and infrastructure development may be more important to them than living in a world dominated by one superpower: the United States.

At the same time, some observers foresee growing centralization of the BRICS' decision-making powers. When it was first established, the BRICS could rely on a consensus-driven approach to making decisions because it only had a handful of members. As more countries are

invited to join, the original members may see consensus as too unwieldy and insist on centralizing power in a smaller group that would be dominated by the founding five countries.

Writing & Discussion

1. What brought about the formation of the BRICS?
2. What has caused the greatest shifts in U.S. economic power across the globe?
3. Some international experts say the world is not becoming multipolar, but rather is becoming, at most, bipolar between only the U.S. and China as power centers. Do you agree? Why or why not? Is there evidence in the article to support your answer?

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ACTIVITY: STATE DEPARTMENT TASK FORCE

You are in the U.S. State Department, which is the part of the U.S. government that deals with other countries. Form groups of four, and each member of each group will have one of the following roles:

Secretary of State – You are in charge of the State Department. Your job is to design U.S. foreign policy and to advise the U.S. president. You also keep your group's discussions focused.

Assistant Secretary of Economic Affairs – You focus on economic policies. Your job is to assess what's happening in the world and explain to the Secretary of State how it might affect the U.S. economy (jobs, money, and trade with other countries).

Assistant Secretary of Intelligence – You focus on keeping the U.S. and its allies safe. Your job is to assess what's happening in the world and explain to the Secretary of State how it might affect world stability (the safety of people in the U.S. and in other countries, especially countries that are America's friends and allies).

Human Rights Observer – You work for a non-governmental organization (NGO). You have been asked to help the Secretary of State understand how everyone's human rights are affected by what's happening in the world. Human rights include access to food, medicine, and energy, as well as freedom of speech, freedom to travel, and freedom to choose your job.

In your roles, meet and discuss the following three scenarios. Decide what the U.S. should do to respond to each scenario:

- **Scenario 1:** The BRICS alliance announces an initiative to develop renewable energy technologies (like solar power and wind energy). It will establish a market to buy and sell energy only among its member countries.
- **Scenario 2:** The BRICS alliance announces a massive investment project in Africa. African countries will use BRICS money to build infrastructure (like roads, highways, and internet networks), and BRICS countries will sell them military weapons and ammunition to build up their armies.
- **Scenario 3:** The BRICS countries propose a requirement for all member countries that they must buy all oil from fellow BRICS member countries, and never from Europe or the United States. Some of the oil will be used for domestic energy, but a lot of it will be used for member countries' military actions.

The Secretary of State should prepare a brief, written report with at least two sentences for each scenario explaining what the U.S. should do in each scenario.



The Church Committee and The Crisis of Public Distrust



From 1975 to 1976, the Special Committee on Intelligence Operations investigated abuses by U.S. intelligence agencies. It was headed by Sen. Frank Church of Idaho, so it was called the Church Committee. Sen. Church is pictured on the far-right-hand side of the picture.

In his last television address to the American people, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the growing threat to democracy posed by the “military-industrial complex.” Before becoming president of the United States in 1952, Eisenhower had served as a five-star general in the U.S. Army and Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe during World War II. But in the farewell address that he gave from the White House on January 17, 1961, President Eisenhower counseled, “we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

Following World War II, the United States had become embroiled in a cold war with the Soviet Union. Eisenhower defined the military-industrial complex as a “conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry.” In other words, it is a close relationship between the military (which is part of the U.S. government) and the defense industry (which are

private corporations that build military equipment, weapons, and technology).

Eisenhower said that this military-industrial complex had developed great political, economic, and social strength within the United States. Left unchecked, this complex would pose great challenges to American democracy and to the basic rights of American citizens, Eisenhower believed.

But after President Eisenhower left the White House in 1961, the influence of the military-industrial complex did not fade. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the United States witnessed political developments and engaged in controversial activities that led to popular concern about hidden and unchecked actions of the military and the federal government. For instance, government intelligence agencies — commonly referred to as the “intelligence community” — exploded in size and strength. Agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Security Agency (NSA) received greater funding, had more employees, and were

SELECT COMMITTEES

A select committee is different than other forms of congressional committees, such as a standing committee, which is a permanent body of members of Congress who generally confront a broader set of political topics and legislative bills than a select committee.

In the 21st century, select committees in the U.S. House of Representatives have included:

Select Committee on Homeland Security (2002–2005): Created in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, this committee oversaw the development of the Department of Homeland Security.

Select Committee on the Climate Crisis (2019–2023): Created to address the urgent issue of climate change and to develop strategies for mitigating its impacts and transitioning to a sustainable, clean energy economy.

Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol (2021–2023): Created to investigate the circumstances and causes of the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol and to recommend ways to prevent future acts of violence.

Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party (2023–present): Formed to examine the strategic competition between the U.S. and China, with a focus on the challenges posed by China's ruling Communist Party.

authorized to undertake a broader range of actions than ever before. Leaders within the intelligence community — such as J. Edgar Hoover, who served as the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from 1935–1972 — were widely seen as some of the most powerful people in the United States.

During this period, the military-industrial complex enabled the United States to become more involved in the Cold War. The United States government was responsible for the toppling of several foreign governments that it deemed to be threats to American interests and international standing. Also, beginning in the 1960s, the United States became an active participant in the Vietnam War. By the time the United States officially exited the Vietnam War in 1973, the government had spent more than \$100 billion on the war, more than 2.7 million Americans had served in Vietnam, and more than 58,000 Americans had died in the war. Civil rights leaders, like Martin Luther King Jr., criticized the United States for dedicating billions of dollars to the military, to intelligence programs, and to our allies in foreign wars while Americans' social and economic needs went unmet.

Many Americans expressed disapproval about these political developments, and clear instances of government lies and politicians' deception only worsened the problem of low public trust. For instance, President Richard Nixon, a Republican, won re-election in 1972, and in the aftermath of that election, journalists began unearthing information about an illegal break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate

Hotel. When the FBI began investigating the break-in and its possible connection to the White House, Nixon pressured the FBI to stop its investigation. Eventually, Nixon would go so far as to fire the special prosecutor Archibald Cox overseeing the Watergate investigation to cover up details related to the president's involvement in the scandal. In 1973 and 1974, the American people watched in confusion as President Nixon continued to maintain his innocence and attempted to undercut the federal investigation into the Watergate scandal.

During Eisenhower's second term in the White House, public trust in the government was quite high: polls indicated that nearly three-fourths of Americans trusted the government to do what was right. When Richard Nixon resigned from the presidential office in 1974, many Americans had become deeply suspicious of their political leaders and military officials. They were critical of the unethical practices that the United States was participating in both domestically and abroad. But by 1974, only 36 percent of Americans reported trust in the government (less than half of the number who reported trust during the late 1950s).

The Church Committee

Following Nixon's resignation, federal officials decided that it was time to do something to address the dwindling public trust within the country. Both political parties believed that tackling the alleged corruption and unethical practices within the intelligence community was a good place to start. In 1975, the U.S. Senate established a select committee with a broad purview: to





At a committee hearing in September 1975, Sen. Frank Church holds up a poison-dart gun used by the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA.

investigate the behavior of the intelligence community to ensure that federal agencies such as the CIA, FBI, and NSA were acting legally and ethically. A select committee is a special committee set up by Congress, which allows committee members (who are members of Congress) to research and investigate a specific topic over a limited period of time.

The official name of the select committee that the U.S. Senate created in 1975 was the United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. The Senator who was chosen to chair the committee was Senator Frank Church, thus the committee has been referred to as the “Church Committee.” In 1975, the U.S. House of Representatives set up a similar select committee.

The bipartisan Church Committee began its work in 1975. Over the course of 16 months, the committee conducted public and private hearings, interviewed hundreds of witnesses, and read through thousands of pages of agency reports and classified government data. This research helped the Committee better understand the numerous secret government operations that had been taking place throughout the Cold War. It also became the basis for the Committee’s deliberations about the kinds of reform and oversight that were necessary to protect against future government misconduct. To make this

monumental investigation possible, the Senators on the Committee relied on 150 staff members to support each stage of their research.

The Committee’s Report and Hopes for Reform

After concluding its investigation, the Church Committee published its voluminous final report on April 29, 1976. This 2,702-page bipartisan report was a bombshell, as it revealed to the American people information about covert operations, assassination attempts, military abuse, and domestic intelligence programs that had not been covered in depth by the media. For example, the FBI’s COINTELPRO projects authorized extensive spying on American citizens, illegal wiretapping, infiltration of civic associations, and coordinated sabotage against political groups

that the federal government deemed to be subversive (such as the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party). The breadth of the Committee’s report was startling: it exposed assassination attempts on Latin American leaders, CIA wiretapping programs against journalists, NSA surveillance of all telegrams leaving the United States, and even a multiyear project that subjected American citizens to drug experiments and new brainwashing techniques.

The Committee’s report outlined the history of the American intelligence community and explained how these agencies had transformed into a direct threat to citizens’ basic rights. These agencies had become a central part of the modern American military, but there were not enough checks in place to keep these agencies accountable to the American people’s elected representatives. On many occasions, the American people themselves did not even know when their privacy, security, and core constitutional freedoms were being violated.

Decades after the dissolution of the Church Committee, we can observe both long-term successes and failures of the select committee. Unfortunately, levels of public trust in the government continued to decline during the 1970s, despite the Committee’s best efforts. But

the Church Committee's report did include dozens of recommendations for improving our federal government. Some of the most important recommendations were calls for new, democratic checks on the executive branch and the intelligence community, which have inspired reform efforts from 1976 to the present.

For example, the Committee's report pushed for the provision of greater oversight of the intelligence community, so that the work of these federal agencies could be evaluated and corrected more readily. This led President Gerald Ford to pass an executive order in 1976, which created new oversight boards for the intelligence community and banned political assassinations. The report also led the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives to establish permanent committees that still provide ongoing legislative oversight of the intelligence community. Additionally, the Church Committee encouraged new legislation that would better regulate the process that executive-branch officials would have to go through to authorize domestic surveillance and wiretapping.

Two years after the Church Committee's report, Congress acted on this recommendation by passing the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). This Act established a unique federal court, the U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC). The FISC has the authority to approve or deny government applications to surveil and gather intelligence on certain kinds of targets. For example, if the FBI wanted to monitor an American citizen who was traveling abroad, their warrant request would have to be approved by the FISC.

After discovering a wide array of civil rights violations committed by executive officials in the federal government, the Church Committee sought to provide

safeguards against unlawful intrusion on our privacy. Almost half a century after the Church Committee completed its work, the FISC still functions to maintain these safeguards.

Writing & Discussion

1. What is the military-industrial complex described by President Eisenhower? Why did he warn Americans about it?
2. Why were Americans losing trust in their government in the 1960s and 1970s?
3. Did the Church Committee succeed in its mission? Why or why not?
4. In his 1961 farewell address, President Eisenhower remarked:

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition [taking] of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. . . . Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

What do you think can make Americans an "alert and knowledgeable citizenry"? What responsibilities does that citizenry have "so that security and liberty may prosper together"?

Author: Paul Baumgardner is an assistant professor of political science at Augustana College in Illinois.

ACTIVITY: TRUST IN GOVERNMENT TODAY

Since the Church Committee's time, public trust in the American federal government has gone up and down. It peaked in 2001 at 54 percent but fell to a near-record low of 16 percent in 2023.*

1. Form into groups of 3–4 students each.
2. Discuss these questions:
 - Why do you think there is a lack of public trust in government today?
 - What can the government do to restore public trust?
 - What can citizens do to restore that trust?
3. Be ready to have a spokesperson share your group's findings with the class.
4. Write a paragraph with your own answer to each of the questions above.

* "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2023." Pew Research Foundation, 19 Sep. 2023.
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People v. Clark

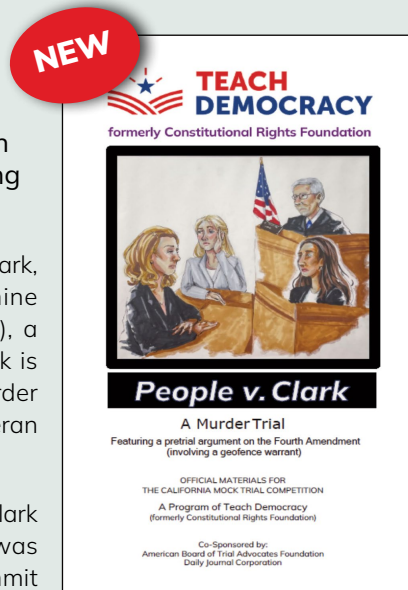
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