

## Church Committee Aides Warn Jordan to Eschew Partisanship

Staff members from the panel viewed as the gold standard of congressional inquiry advised the top Republican to pursue a bipartisan inquiry and operate in good faith with Democrats.



By Luke Broadwater

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As the new Republican-led panel tasked with investigating the weaponization of government continued this week to issue new subpoenas, those who orchestrated the inquiry that its leaders have claimed as a model are warning the chairman against allowing his work to veer into partisan territory.

More than two dozen staff members from the panel formed in the 1970s that came to be known as the Church Committee sent an open letter on Wednesday to Representative Jim Jordan, Republican of Ohio and the chairman of the Judiciary Committee and its powerful new subcommittee. They offered advice for how he could follow in the footsteps of their panel, which uncovered decades of intelligence and civil liberties abuses under presidents of both parties and set the gold standard in Congress for scrutinizing the executive branch.

The counsel is simple: Pursue a bipartisan inquiry, follow the facts, do not try to interfere with open investigations, and operate in good faith.

The Church Committee, formed in 1975 and commonly known by the name of its chairman Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, was formally called the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. It investigated warrantless electronic surveillance affecting U.S. citizens; C.I.A. assassination plots against foreign leaders; C.I.A. and F.B.I. mail-opening programs; C.I.A. drug testing on unwitting governmental personnel; communications intercepts affecting Americans; and the disruption and discrediting of peaceful civil rights and antiwar activists.

It is regarded by members of both parties as the paragon of a bipartisan and productive congressional inquiry.



In the 1970s, Senator Frank Church, left, an Idaho Democrat, led a committee that uncovered decades of intelligence and civil liberties abuses. Henry Griffin/Associated Press

Mr. Jordan's panel, by contrast, has thus far been widely viewed on Capitol Hill as a highly partisan exercise aimed at pushing the narrative that the federal government is biased against conservatives and the right. The formation of a "Church-style committee" was a top demand of a band of right-wing Republicans who resisted electing Speaker Kevin McCarthy of California, and its inaugural hearing last week relitigated a litany of old grievances about the treatment of former President Donald J. Trump and others.

"If they're sincere about emulating the Church Committee model, then we wanted the particulars to be laid out there clearly so that everyone has guideposts to measure the extent to which Jordan is succeeding or failing and living up to the legacy of the Church Committee," Frederick D. Baron, a former associate deputy attorney general who was a lawyer for the Church Committee, said of the letter.

Paul Michel, a former federal judge appointed by former President Ronald Reagan who served as a Republican aide on the Church Committee, said many lines of inquiry the panel had pursued did not pan out.

“There were a lot of hints of some very bad conduct, but when we pursued all the documents and the witnesses, some of it turned out to be quite innocent,” he recalled. “So if the Jordan committee is evenhanded factually, they’ll do a good job and it’ll be credible. But if they pursue what some people might call conspiracy theories, and only look at things that seem to support that, it will eventually be viewed as not credible.”

A spokesman for the panel declined to comment.

The letter comes as the House Judiciary Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government has begun issuing subpoenas, seeking documents for an investigation into whether the government mistreated parents who were scrutinized after school officials endured threats and harassment over mask mandates and teaching about racism.

On Wednesday, Mr. Jordan issued more subpoenas, this time to the technology companies Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta and Microsoft for documents and communications relating to whether they had worked with federal government to block certain Americans from communicating through their platforms — something Mr. Jordan calls “censorship by proxy.”

The subpoenas require the chief executives of those companies, Sundar Pichai, Andy Jassy, Tim Cook, Mark Zuckerberg and Satya Nadella, to turn over all requested documents and communications by March 23.

The committee did not issue a subpoena to Twitter or its owner, Elon Musk, who has at times aligned himself with the right, urging voters last fall to elect Republicans and saying he would welcome Mr. Trump back to his platform.

In the letters, the panel said such an action was unnecessary because Twitter “recently set a benchmark for how transparent Big Tech companies can be about interactions with government over censorship,” citing the release of the so-called Twitter Files, which showed how the company restricted some tweets after receiving requests to do so from government officials.

The House Judiciary Committee said it has been working to get documents from the companies since December, when Republicans were in the minority, without success.

“Your response without compulsory process has been woefully inadequate,” Mr. Jordan wrote to the executives.

At its first hearing, Democrats fought against the very premise of the weaponization committee, and argued that Mr. Jordan hadn’t given agencies enough time to respond to him before issuing subpoenas.

Church Committee staff members recalled a different era on Capitol Hill, when Republicans and Democrats worked closely together and “to an extent that my students can hardly even imagine,” said Gregory F. Treverton, a former chairman of the National Intelligence Council who was a Democratic staff member on the panel.

“On the Church Committee, there was broad agreement that these things ought to be looked at and, in the end, there was broad agreement on what we might do about them,” he said. “In this case, there’s no broad agreement on what ought to be looked at.”

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