

Ranking Member Rand Paul
Opening Statement for Threats Hearing
10/31/2023

In 1976, the Church Committee issued its final report revealing decades of widespread abuse by federal intelligence agencies against U.S. citizens. The bipartisan Church Committee outlined countless examples of how the federal government used powers that were meant to counter foreign threats against its own citizens in an effort to “protect society.” This happened under Presidents of both political parties.

Domestic groups, like the NAACP and the Women’s Liberation Group, engaging in non-violent lawful political expression were targeted and surveilled for contradicting the approved government narrative.

Intelligence agencies used their powers to serve ideological purposes, attempting to covertly influence social policy and political action. The government distorted and exaggerated facts, leveraged mass media, and attacked the leadership of groups it considered to be threats to the social order. One of these so-called threats to social order was Martin Luther King, Jr.

The purpose of the Church Committee’s years long investigation was to expose the intelligence agencies unlawful overreach into the private lives of Americans. The Committee hoped that its findings would result in more transparency and accountability to ensure the abuses that had occurred would never happen again.

They say history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

Unfortunately, as we sit here today, I fear that our federal government is still undertaking many of the same tactics that the Church Committee found to be unworthy of a democracy, and occasionally reminiscent of totalitarian regimes.

Federal agencies, including the FBI and DHS, continue to operate in a manner that is outside the scope of their authorities, wasting taxpayer dollars, and infringing on the rights of Americans.

Earlier this month, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals found that federal agencies including the FBI and DHS, likely violated the First Amendment by coercing social media companies to remove speech the government disagreed with related to the origins of COVID-19, pandemic lockdowns, vaccine efficacy, and the Hunter Biden laptop stories.

FBI and DHS regularly met with social media companies and pressured them to remove content it deemed as misinformation, including posts and accounts that originated from within the United States.

And the censorship of constitutionally protected speech on social media is just one example of the Executive Branch actions in recent years weaponizing the federal government against its people.

The FBI continues to misuse its authority under Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), targeting Americans engaging in First Amendment protected activity, as we observed with individuals participating in the George Floyd protests.

DHS warned of violence from Americans who questioned the efficacy and safety of the COVID-19 vaccines and protested government overreach associated with pandemic mitigation measures.

These agencies charged with protecting the security of our nation, targeted parents who protested restrictive COVID-19 policies at school board meetings and labeled Catholics as potential domestic terrorists.

It is hardly a surprise that the faith of Americans in their government is dwindling. Instead of focusing on the rampant violent crime across the nation and the unprecedented crisis at our border, FBI and DHS are using their resources to surveil and censor law-abiding Americans engaging in constitutionally protected activity.

When the federal government's priorities are improperly focused inward, legitimate national security threats go unnoticed. The Church Committee highlighted this important point highlighting that the FBI placed more emphasis on domestic dissent than on organized crime, and its efforts to combat foreign spies suffered because of its focus on American protest groups.

The narratives from the past and the present draw a concerning parallel, the lessons of the Church Committee report resonate nearly 50 years later. Yet, the cycle of Executive Branch overreach continues. The American people deserve accountability from the federal government and Congress cannot continue to abdicate its constitutional duty to conduct oversight.

As the Church Committee aptly pointed out, power must be checked and balanced and the preservation of liberty requires the restraint of laws. It is our responsibility to ensure that the principals of American democracy endure, and I hope my colleagues on both sides of the aisle will work with me to do just that.