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**LAWMAKERS AND SPIES:**

**CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT OF INTELLIGENCE IN THE UNITED STATES**

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**Abstract**

This essay has three objectives. The first is to present a brief history of intelligence oversight (accountability) in the United States since the end of the Second World War; the second is to examine the chief obstacles to effective oversight; and the third is to address a set of specific questions about oversight that frequently arise in public forums on this topic.

Intelligence oversight has gone through five phases since the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947: the Era of Trust (1947-74); the Era of Uneasy Partnership (1975-86); the Era of Distrust (1987-91); the Era of Partisan Advocacy (1992-2001); and, now, the Era of Congressional Acquiescence (2002- ). Oversight since 1975 has been relatively robust compared to earlier years, yet it falls far short of goals espoused by reformers. Lawmakers have been desultory in their oversight duties, responding responsibly to fire alarms—carrying out probes into domestic spying, improper covert actions, counterintelligence vulnerabilities, and major intelligence failures—but giving insufficient attention to the day-to-day police work that might uncover weaknesses in the first place and eliminate the need for hurry-up *ex post facto* firefighting. For the most part, intelligence oversight in Congress has been a story of discontinuous motivation, ad hoc responses to scandals, and reliance on the initiative of just a few lawmakers. Responding after the fact to intelligence failures in this dangerous world is not good enough; overseers must try harder to prevent surprises like the 9/11 attacks from occurring in the first place.