

A History of Notable Senate Investigations
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Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program
(The Truman Committee)

Resolution passed: March 1, 1941

Chairman: Harry S. Truman (D-MO), 1941-1944; James Mead (D-NY), 1944-1946; Harley Kilgore (D-WV), 1946-1947; Owen Brewster (R-ME), 1947-1948

Committee members:

Joseph Ball (R-MN)

Owen Brewster (R-ME)

Henry Styles Bridges (Styles) (R-NH)

Frank P. Briggs (D-MO)

Harold Burton (R-OH)

Harry Cain (R-WA)

Thomas Connally (Tom) (D-TX)

Homer Ferguson (R-MI)

Carl Hatch (D-NM)

Carl Hayden (D-AZ)

Clyde Herring (D-IA)

William Knowland (R-CA)

George Malone (R-NV)

James Mead (D-NY)

Joseph McCarthy (R-WI)

James McGrath (D-RI)

Hugh Mitchell (D-WA)

Herbert O'Connor (D-MD)

Claude Pepper (D-FL)

James Tunnell (D-DE)

Monrad Wallgren (D-WA)

John Williams (R-DE)

Origins

On February 10, 1941, a relatively unknown senator, Democrat Harry S. Truman of Missouri, rose on the Senate floor to deliver a speech that would forever change his destiny. Though the United States officially remained "neutral" to the war raging in Europe, the German invasion and occupation of France and the Low Countries in 1940 prompted action by the U.S. government. President Franklin Roosevelt requested, and Congress hastily appropriated, more than \$10.5 billion to bolster national defense programs. In a carefully crafted speech, Truman expressed his concerns about a rapid defense buildup. A former small business owner, he cautioned against awarding defense contracts in a way that "make[s] the big men bigger and

let[s] the little men go out of business or starve to death.” He advised against distributing contracts “on the basis of friendship or political affiliation.” Championing legislative oversight, Truman proposed an “investigation of the national defense program and the handling of contracts.”¹

Process

Truman’s Senate Resolution 71, approved unanimously on March 1, 1941, created the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program (commonly known as the Truman committee) with seven members, and granted its chairman, Harry Truman, \$15,000 to hire staff and conduct an investigation. The committee’s thoughtfully prepared reports quickly earned it the respect of members of Congress. Consequently, the Senate extended the life of the committee through a series of resolutions and provided it with additional money. Senator Truman resigned from the committee in 1944 when he became the vice presidential candidate; three chairmen led the committee in the succeeding four years.

Public Relations

Shortly after the formation of the special committee, Truman delivered a radio address describing rumors circulating in Washington of profiteering and favoritism in the awarding of defense contracts. “When people create delays for profit, when they sell poor products for defense use, when they cheat on price and quality,” he declared, “they aren’t any different from a draft dodger and the public at large feels just the same way about it.” Truman encouraged Americans to report to the committee “information of irregularities, based on facts, where the Government’s interests have been violated.”² Thousands of Americans from across the country responded, flooding the committee with letters.

Senators publicly claimed that the committee did not “seek headlines.” Privately, however, members understood the importance of well-timed press releases and the need to keep the public apprised of the committee’s activities. Journalists frequently reported the investigations, making Truman a populist hero. In a letter to his wife Bess he boasted, “I’m on the front pages of the *Kansas City Star*, *St. Louis Star-Times*, and *Kansas City Journal* ... and mentioned in about three or four other places.”³

Investigation

Before calling his first hearing, Truman studied the reports of the controversial Civil War-era Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. He concluded that “The nature of the congressional investigating committee has suffered violence at the hands of some who have not understood or appreciated the scope and function of such a committee.” The chairman resolved that his committee would function as a “benevolent policeman,” investigating programs and presenting its findings to the American people.⁴

Under Truman’s leadership, and with able staff, the committee pursued a broad agenda, probing wartime shortages, cost overruns, nepotism in hiring, fraud, and labor strikes. The committee selected for its first investigation the construction of troop quarters, visiting nine typical army camps around the nation. Senators found cost-overruns to be the norm, rather than the exception. In Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, for example, the final cost of construction totaled more than 10 times the original estimate of \$125,000. At Camp Blanding in Florida, the contractor violated the terms of the agreement—which forbid the hiring of subcontractors—doubling its profits. The contract to build Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, required the

construction of constructing 17 miles of railroad tracks to carry supplies to the site. The committee found that “The railroad was not and could not be completed in time to assist in the construction of the camp. All lumber and material were brought in by trucks.” Truman denounced the spending: “[We] are going to have to pay for the cost, the waste and the inefficiency in the form of increased taxation for years to come.”⁵ One *Washington Post* editorial echoed the sentiments of Americans around the country who supported the committee’s work: “The best way to discourage recklessness on the part of administrative officials is to keep the record of their spending before the public.” The army responded to the report by revising its contract-awarding process.⁶

Investigations of manufacturing and parts production revealed a woefully inadequate, and at times dysfunctional, inspection process. An Army Air Forces inspector, complaining of the quality of engine parts produced by Wright Aeronautical, recalled, “When I protested about the roughness of these bearings I was told that during war time we couldn’t be too choosy.” In another whistleblowing incident, an army official testified that three “ready to ship” engines on the loading dock, when disassembled, “were found to be in such a condition that they could not have been installed in an airplane.” Employees described how plant managers intentionally misplaced paperwork identifying “bad parts” in order to pass them off as usable components ready for distribution. Despite these irregularities, some army officials condemned the practice of whistleblowing—writing letters to elected officials to expose wrongdoing at production plants—as a form of “insubordination.”⁷

The committee’s work prompted criticism from officials in the Roosevelt administration. When Congress declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941, critics at the White House and within Congress called for the committee’s dissolution. The committee fervently opposed these proposals, describing their work as more vital than ever: “During the 8 months in which the special committee has operated, it has noted and called attention to many things which have adversely affected production.” Members pledged that the committee would “continue a constant watch for the purpose of assuring that such problems are met head-on and solved.”⁸ Though it avoided directly criticizing the president, the committee sharply critiqued aspects of defense planning. In one report, it blamed army generals for failing to adequately modernize the army, claiming they ran the war effort “along Civil war lines.”⁹ When Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan asked Truman who was to blame for the “lack of adequate organization and coordination in the administration of defense,” Truman, normally loyal to the Democratic administration, conceded that the White House was responsible.¹⁰

The corruption and waste reported by the Truman committee spurred the executive branch to centralize war production within a new agency, the War Production Board (WPB). The WPB soon came under the committee’s scrutiny for its policy of hiring dollar-a-year men to staff government agencies. Employed by the government for a dollar a year, these men continued to draw salaries from the nation’s largest corporations. The committee suspected a conflict of interest, concluding the executives were “unable to divorce themselves from their subconscious gravitation to their own industries” and suggested that their loyalties delayed maximum war production.¹¹ Truman continued to fight for the small business man but as one historian observed, “The concept of bringing maximum efficiency to the war effort by involving tens of thousands of small enterprises was never feasible. Inexorably, the war made big manufacturing bigger.”¹²

Outcome

The Truman committee proved an able “watchdog” during a critical period in the nation’s history and deserves credit for uncovering corruption, waste, and fraud, thereby saving American taxpayers billions of dollars. In 1948 the Senate made the Truman committee permanent, forming the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Governmental Affairs Committee, to investigate issues of waste and fraud throughout the executive branch.¹³ For its well-deserved praise, however, the Truman committee left a mixed legacy. Critics accused the committee of avoiding controversial issues, including allegations made by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that U.S. military contractors practiced discriminatory hiring practices. When a Democratic primary opponent accused Senator Albert “Happy” Chandler of Kentucky of accepting gifts from a war contractor (the gift, a large swimming pool, was built of critical war materials including steel and brass), the Truman Committee found “‘no evidence in any way indicating’ that the Senator had sought to help his contractor friend.” Not persuaded by the report, critics charged the committee with playing politics during a campaign season.¹⁴

Arguably the committee’s greatest legacy was the career of Chairman Harry S. Truman. In 1944 Washington journalists named him “one of the ten most valuable officials in Washington,” the only member of Congress to make the list.¹⁵ At the Democratic National Convention of 1944 liberals and conservatives split over the renomination of Vice President Henry Wallace. Truman emerged as the compromise candidate. Vice president for only four months, Truman took the oath of office as president of the United States on April 12, 1945 following Roosevelt’s unexpected death.

¹ *Congressional Record*, 10 Feb 1941, 830-31; Theodore Wilson, “The Truman Committee on War Mobilization, 1941-44,” in Roger A. Bruns, David L. Hostetter, and Raymond W. Smock, eds., *Congress Investigates: A Critical and Documentary History*, 639; “Senator Sees Favoritism in Defense Orders,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 Feb 1941, 16.

² “Citizens Asked to Give Facts on Arms ‘Cheating,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 Mar 1941, 27.

³ Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983), 469.

⁴ Truman, *Memoirs*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc.), 168; Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1973), 145-6.

⁵ Alonzo Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 251-52.

⁶ “Those Extra Costs,” *Washington Post*, 2 May, 1941, 10; Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, *Investigation of the National Defense Program*, 77th Cong., 1st sess., 1941, 14, 18-19.

⁷ Executive Session transcripts, Records of the Special Committee of the Senate to Investigate the National Defense Program, RG 46 SEN 79A-F30, HE 5, Hearings about Wright Aeronautical Corp., Box 1303, 8-9; “Says Public Should Know Test Results,” *The Hartford Courant*, 1 Oct 1943; 7.

⁸ *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 1st sess., 10 Dec 1941, 9600-9601.

⁹ Chesly Manly, “Billions Waste on Arms Charged: Obsolete Guns on Order; New Funds Refused,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 Aug 1941, 1.

¹⁰ *Congressional Record*, 14 Aug 1941, 7118; Paul W. Ward, “Probers Declare Defense Lacking,” *The Sun*, 15 Aug 1941, 6.

¹¹ James Reston, “Truman Charges WPB Aides Caused War Work Delays,” *New York Times*, 19 Jun 1942; 1.

¹² Hamby, *Man of the People*, 258.

¹³ Sam Nunn, “The Impact of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations on Federal Policy,” *Georgia Law Review*, 21 (1), 17-56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 257; “Fear Truman Committee is Ducking Probe,” *The Chicago Defender*, 2 Aug 1941, 4; Dewey L. Fleming, “Swimming Pool is Kentucky Issue,” *The Sun*, 18 Jul 1942; 1.

¹⁵ Hamby, *Man of the People*, 260.