

A History of Notable Senate Investigations prepared by the United States Senate Historical Office

Citation: "Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Notable Senate Investigations, U.S. Senate Historical Office, Washington, D.C."

Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War

Resolution passed: Senate, December 9, 1861; House, December 10, 1861

Final report issued: May 22, 1865

Chairman: Senator Benjamin Wade (R-OH)

Committee members:

Zachariah Chandler (Senate, R-MI)

John Covode (House, R-PA); replaced by Benjamin Loan (R-MO)

Daniel Gooch (House, R-MA)

Andrew Johnson (Senate, D-TN); replaced by Joseph Wright (Unionist-IN); replaced by Benjamin Harding (D-OR)

George Julian (House, R-IN)

Moses Odell (House, D-NY)

Origins

On Sunday, July 21, 1861, several members of Congress journeyed from Washington, D.C., to Centreville, Virginia, to watch the Union Army march into battle. On a hill overlooking Bull Run Creek, lawmakers, joined by journalists and other curious civilians, ate picnic lunches as they watched the battle (thus known as the "Picnic Battle"). As journalist Benjamin Perley Poore commented, spectators gathered "as they would have gone to see a horse-race or to witness a Fourth of July procession." The Union Army performed well in the morning, but by early afternoon the Confederates had turned the tide with reinforcements. When Union generals finally called retreat around 4:00 p.m., the frightened soldiers fled for their lives, sweeping up civilians in their retreat back to Washington.

Near the battlefield, a group of senators heard a loud noise and looked around to see the road filled with retreating soldiers, horses, and wagons. "Turn back, turn back, we're whipped," Union soldiers cried as they ran past the spectators. Startled, Michigan senator Zachariah Chandler tried to block the road to stop the retreat. Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio, sensing a humiliating defeat, picked up a discarded rifle and threatened to shoot any soldier who ran. While Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts distributed sandwiches, a Confederate shell destroyed his buggy, forcing him to escape on a stray mule. Iowa senator James Grimes barely avoided capture and vowed never to go near another battlefield. Dismayed, senators returned to Washington to deliver eyewitness accounts to a stunned President Lincoln.¹

Process

To the dismay of many northerners, the defeat at Bull Run was the first in a series of Union military disasters. Casualties mounted and in October Senator Edward D. Baker of Oregon, a close friend to President Lincoln, died at the Battle of Ball's Bluff. In the opening days of the 37th Congress (1861-1863), the public and elected officials called for an inquiry into events surrounding the dramatic defeats suffered by the Union Army. Senator William Pitt

Fessenden of Maine articulated the thoughts of many when he said, “We see many things done which do not meet the public approbation. We see some things done which we do not approve ourselves, and which evidently call for an investigation, or, at any rate, call for such an explanation as shall satisfy the people.”² In that spirit, Senator Chandler introduced a resolution on December 5, 1861, to investigate the battles at Bull Run and Ball’s Bluff, while other senators demanded a broad inquiry into the conduct of the war. Consequently, Senator Grimes amended the resolution, calling for a joint committee to examine all aspects of the war. The concurrent resolution, passed on December 10, 1861, created a joint committee comprised of three senators and four representatives and granted its members the power to “inquire into the conduct of the present war and to send for persons and papers.”³ Five Republicans and two Democrats served on the committee, reflecting Republican control of the Civil War era Congress. Traditionally, the senator who proposed the resolution chaired the committee, but Chandler deferred to his close friend and colleague Senator Wade, believing that the Ohioan’s legal background made him particularly well suited for directing the investigation.⁴

Public Relations

Members of the joint committee agreed to keep their deliberations secret. Meeting in a Senate committee room, the joint committee held no public hearings and forbade those who testified from speaking with the press.⁵ Committee members regularly broke their own rules, however, leaking information to newspapers to generate public support for their efforts. In March of 1862, for example, committee members leaked the written statement of General John C. Frémont, commander of the Western Department and a favorite of the committee, to the *New York Daily Tribune*. They hoped to enlist public opinion behind General Frémont’s controversial actions in the field, and to draw upon this well of public support to lobby Lincoln for Frémont’s reappointment.⁶

Committee investigations were driven, in part, by allegations published in popular newspapers about the performance of commanders and conditions in the field. Following newspaper accounts that General William R. Montgomery treated soldiers “inhumanely and disloyal men and women very leniently,” the Joint Committee called on Montgomery to testify to the charges.⁷

Investigation

Abolitionists known as “Radical Republicans” dominated the committee and frequently criticized the president’s war strategy as not being aggressive enough. Senator Wade, irritated by the president’s gradual approach to emancipation and equality for African Americans, dismissed Lincoln as “a fool.”⁸ The joint committee itself faced criticism from Washington insiders who decried its work as misguided and ill-informed. Critics noted that the joint committee was well-intentioned, but that its members had no military experience and seemed unqualified to analyze war-related decisions and the commanders who made them. Some military leaders dismissed the inquiry as partisan or ideological and not in the nation’s best interest. Benjamin Perley Poore denounced the committee as “a mischievous organization, which assumed dictatorial powers.”⁹

Regardless of such criticism, the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War pursued a broad investigatory agenda. In addition to examining failed military campaigns, the committee scrutinized a number of wide-ranging issues, including corruption in military supply contracts, the mistreatment of Union prisoners by Confederate forces, the massacre of Cheyenne Indians, Union trade activities, and gunboat construction, to name just a few. The joint committee worked

through two Congresses, meeting 272 times over four years. Subcommittees were formed to maximize time and resources and meet with as many witnesses as possible.¹⁰ Members frequently traveled outside of Washington, D.C., recording testimony from witnesses and making first-hand assessments of the war effort. One inquiry included a visit to a nearby army convalescent center in Alexandria, Virginia, to document the treatment of Union soldiers by medical teams.¹¹

Despite Senator Wade's withering assessment of Lincoln, the joint committee maintained friendly relations with the executive branch. President Lincoln and his successor Andrew Johnson (a former member of the joint committee), and their cabinets, complied with committee requests for meetings and access to information. Members of the joint committee frequently blamed military commanders for Union losses, often accusing them of disloyalty to the government, and they pressed for changes in military command. They strongly encouraged Lincoln to remove Major General George McClellan from his command of the Army of the Potomac after successive losses early in the war. The president eventually relieved McClellan in November of 1862, but he did so on his own terms, largely disregarding the joint committee's recommendations. The joint committee proved more convincing in another case, however, and the president acquiesced to its demands that he approve the arrest and imprisonment of Brigadier General Charles Pomeroy Stone. The committee had long questioned Stone's loyalty, and blamed him for Union defeats.

Outcome

The Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War produced volumes of copious reports based on its field work and the testimony of dozens of witnesses. Published periodically throughout the committee's four-year tenure, these reports were often summarized in newspapers. Nevertheless, in comparison to other congressional investigations, the work of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War remained mostly unknown to the American public. Despite this low-profile status, the committee's investigations fulfilled the congressional responsibility for oversight during a time of national crisis. Committee members felt satisfied that their inquiry prompted President Lincoln to more carefully consider the strategy and evaluate the performance of his top field commanders. Interviews with military commanders provided detailed accounts of action in the field, while creating a record of wartime events which otherwise would not have been preserved.

¹ Benjamin Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis*, vol II, (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, Publishers, 1886), 84-85; Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 99-103.

² *The Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d sess., 9 Dec, 1861, 30.

³ *The Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d sess., December 5, 9, 10, 1861, 16, 32, 40; Bruce Tap, *Over Lincoln's Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War*, (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1998), 24.

⁴ *The Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d sess., 17 Dec 1861, 110.

⁵ Elizabeth Joan Doyle, "The Conduct of the War, 1861," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Roger Bruns, eds. *Congress Investigates: A Documented History, 1792-1974*, vol II, 1204, 1228-1231.

⁶ Bruce Tap, *Over Lincoln's Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War*, (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1998), 93-94.

⁷ "General Montgomery," *Chicago Tribune*, 14 Feb, 1862, 1.

⁸ Benjamin Wade to Caroline Wade, 25 Oct 1861, Benjamin F. Wade Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁹ Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis*, 103-104.

¹⁰ Doyle, "The Conduct of the War, 1861," 1201; *Chicago Tribune* 11 Apr 1862, 2.

¹¹ "Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Journal of the Committee," xiii-xiv.

U.S. Senate Historical Office
www.senate.gov