

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Amateurs at War: The Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, 1861-1865

By **Bruce Tap**, Associate Faculty, University of Phoenix

With the loss of over 620,000 lives, the American Civil War was the bloodiest of all American conflicts. Lasting over four years, the American Civil War produced some of the most significant battles in all of American history. Gettysburg, Antietam, Bull Run, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and countless others are the subject of numerous books, documentaries, and scholarly investigation. For those Americans who experienced the war first hand, it was a long, drawn out, bitter, and costly struggle. Although many Americans believed that Northern victory, given the North's advantages in population, manufacturing, and other resources, was inevitable, the South proved to be a formidable adversary.

In the early phases of the war, both sides approached the conflict with unfounded and unrealistic assumptions. Leroy Pope Walker, the Confederacy's first Secretary of War, believed that so little blood would be shed in gaining Southern independence that he humorously offered to clean up all the blood spilled with his own handkerchief. Northerners, cognizant of their own material superiority, were even more confident. Northern congressmen, particularly Republicans, had heard Southerners bluster about secession for many years. They were tired of the threats and ready for a Northern army to expose secession for what it was: a big bag of hot air. As it turned out, a four year war with as many casualties as the Civil War generated was not anticipated by many 19th century Americans.

To win the American Civil War, it was necessary for the North to conquer the South and defeat its armies. This meant that in most situations, Northern armies had to take the offensive. Although the Confederacy did not always pursue a purely defensive strategy, such a strategy was plausible and gave them the advantage that defense afforded armies in the mid-19th century. The job of Northern commanders, then, was potentially much more difficult than that of their Confederate counterparts. As Northern newspaper editors clamored for action in the spring and summer of 1861, the Northern public was subject to a series of humiliating defeats on the part of Northern armies. The Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861 was followed by a defeat in the West, when Union forces under Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon were bested by Confederates at the Battle of Wilson's Creek on August 10, 1861 near Springfield, Missouri. The defeat at Wilson's Creek was all the more bitter because Lyon, a heroic, dashing figure, was killed in the fighting.

Then on October 21, 1861, a small engagement at Ball's Bluff, near Leesburg, Virginia, ended in disaster when Union forces were trapped without the proper transport to retreat across the Potomac River. The Union officer commanding, Colonel Edward Baker was a friend of President Lincoln and was killed in the engagement, much to the shock of the congressional fraternity in the nation's capital. Baker's death and the poor planning that seemed to characterize the affair at Ball's Bluff made many Republican politicians suspicious of the officer corps that commanded the Army of the Potomac.

By the time the 37th Congress met in early December 1861, many congressmen were angry and impatient. In addition to the Union defeats, many were upset that the Army of the Potomac, now led by the youthful and dashing Major General George Brinton McClellan was taking no action. Republican congressmen, in particular, were also upset with the seeming ineptitude of newly elected President Abraham Lincoln. As a relative political novice and a westerner, Lincoln did not come to the nation's capital with a large reservoir of respect. The poor performance of Federal armies in the field was his responsibility in the opinion of many congressmen. For many of Lincoln's Republican colleagues in Congress, his lack of expertise in military affairs would make it necessary for the Congress to take action. It would do so by creating of a joint select committee: the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War.

The creation of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War began with a December 2 resolution from New York Republican representative Roscoe Conkling, who wanted an inquiry into the disaster at Ball's Bluff. In the Senate, a few days later, Michigan's Republican Senator Zachariah Chandler introduced a resolution to investigate Union military defeats at both Ball's Bluff and Bull Run. Eventually what would emerge from debate and discussion in both the Senate and the House of Representatives was a joint select committee with the power to investigate all aspects of the Union war effort and with the power to subpoena witnesses as well as papers from government agencies.

The joint select congressional committee was a common enough legislative tool in American history. In the case of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, three senators and four House members were selected to service on the seven member committee. Since Republicans held a majority in both houses of the 37th Congress, they would get a majority of seats on the committee. Senate members of the committee (chosen by Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin, president of the Senate) were Benjamin Franklin Wade from Ohio, Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, and the sole Democratic member, Andrew Johnson from Tennessee. House members were George Washington Julian of Indiana, John Covode of Pennsylvania, Daniel Wheelwright Gooch of Massachusetts, and the sole Democratic House member, Moses Fowler Odell from New York. Because of his legal experience, Ohio Republican Wade was selected as the chair. Republicans Wade and Chandler had been in the Senate for a number of years and were well known as vigorous anti-slavery advocates, while Andrew Johnson had the distinction of being the only Senator from a seceded state to have remained within the United States Senate. Republican house member John Covode was undoubtedly chosen because of his previous experience on a House committee—popularly known as the

Covode Committee—that looked into financial irregularities in the Buchanan administration. George Julian, perhaps the most radical Republican on the committee, was a crusading anti-slavery zealot, the son-in-law of the abolitionist, Joshua Reed Giddings, a well-known Ohio congressman. Daniel Gooch was a little known Massachusetts Republican from Melrose, near Boston. As it would turn out, Gooch would become one the committee’s most skillful examiners. The final committee member, Democrat Moses Odell, despite being outnumbered by his Republican counterparts, would be an active and extremely hard working contributor to the committee’s work.

Once the committee was formed, what would it do? Many standing committees of Congress gather information to draft and create legislation; however, the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War drafted few bills. Its purpose was investigation and oversight. Given broad powers and authority, the Joint Committee and its principal members conceived of its role as investigating all aspects of the Union war efforts.

During its four year tenure, the committee examined a variety of war-related activities and enterprises. The construction of light draught monitors, the examination of government ice contracts, trade in Confederate areas, and the examination of various quartermaster’s departments were just a few of the areas that came under the committee’s purview. From the beginning of the 37th Congress, however, committee members believed their real mission was to investigate Union military operations so as to find out the reasons for Union defeat and military inactivity.

Already in early December, 1861, members of the Joint Committee were hounding the Lincoln administration with questions and concerns about the competency of Major General George McClellan. Why was not the general moving the Army of the Potomac? How long did he plan to wait before taking action against the Confederacy? When McClellan took to his bed with typhoid fever in late December 1861, the committee’s Republican majority became particularly concerned about the inactivity of the Army of the Potomac. Attending a January 6, 1862 Cabinet meet, committee members pressed Lincoln to replace McClellan with Major General Irvin McDowell, a McClellan divisional commander who had presided over the army at the First Battle of Bull Run.

While President Lincoln would not replace McClellan at that time, he, too, was becoming skeptical of McClellan’s competence and plans. In addition, when a new Secretary of War, Edwin McMasters Stanton, was appointed to take the place of Simon Cameron in early January 1862, Stanton—initially an ally of McClellan—quickly adopted the committee’s viewpoint of McClellan’s lack of military prowess. In early March, Chairman Benjamin Wade had a particularly stormy interview with the president. Telling the president that McClellan should be removed from command, the president asked Wade who should replace him. When Wade retorted that anyone would do, Lincoln snapped back, “Wade, anybody will do for you, but I must have somebody.”

When McClellan later in the month launched his amphibious Peninsula Campaign against Richmond, the pressure on him temporarily abated.

While the committee was vigorously pursuing McClellan, it also conducted investigations of a number of Union military operations including the battles of Bull Run, Ball's Bluff, and Major General John Charles Frémont's tenure as commander of the Department of the West. In examining how the committee investigated and drew its conclusions about battles and military operations, it is important to note that none of the original committee members had significant military experience. They were amateurs who shared popular and often naïve perspectives about warfare. Failing to understand how rifled muskets and rifled artillery had fundamentally altered military tactics in the Civil War, committee members expected generals to engage the enemy in headfirst frontal assaults, regardless of the consequences. In other words, committee members scarcely understood how rifled weaponry had outdated Napoleonic tactics of frontal assaults. A well-entrenched army had an overwhelming advantage on an attacker, due in large part to the increased range and accuracy of a rifled musket. Committee members did not appreciate the new realities of warfare. A general who worried overly about high casualties was, in the opinion of many committee members, a coward at best and a traitorous coward at worst.

In addition, committee members expected the Union armies to be commanded by men who shared their political point of view. This meant endorsing the emancipation of slaves and a hard war policy toward the Confederacy that would include confiscation of all types of enemy property. If a general did not share this philosophy or point of view, committee members were often suspicious of his loyalty.

As the nation's military academy at West Point was largely a conservative institution that was under the influence of the thinking of Baron Henri Antoine de Jomini, members of the committee were naturally suspicious of the graduates. Jomini and many of his adherents at West Point adopted a point of view that emphasized that wars were fought between professional armies with minimal impact on civilians. Harassment of civilians, confiscation of their property, and emancipation of their slaves was, from a Jominian viewpoint, a forbidden and unwise policy. Since many military professionals would occupy some of the highest ranking positions in the United States armies, including such generals as McClellan, Don Carlos Buell, and Henry Wager Halleck, there were bound to be conflicts with the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War.

When investigating the military defeats of Bull Run and Ball's Bluff, the committee demonstrated its simplistic way of analyzing events—a pattern that would be repeated throughout its investigative tenure. Numerous witnesses would appear before it; committee members would ask many questions, and witnesses, particularly some of the officers who testified, would give complicated, even elaborate, testimony. In many cases, however, such detail was wasted on committee members who seemed to have pre-judged most investigations before the testimony was even gathered. In examining the Union defeat at the first battle of Bull Run, for instance, the committee focused on the

incompetence of Major General Robert Patterson. Although Patterson was not a West Point graduate, he was a member of the Democratic Party and known for holding conservative views on the nature of the conflict. In other words, Patterson was a general who believed the war should not impact the issue of slavery in any way.

While there were many reasons for the Union defeat at Bull Run, the committee found it convenient to shuffle most of the blame on General Patterson. Patterson had been ordered by General-in-Chief Winfield Scott to make sure he prevented Confederate troops at Winchester, Virginia under Major General Joseph Eggleston Johnson from reinforcing the Confederate army at Manassas, Virginia. Believing that General Irvin McDowell planned to attack Confederate forces at Manassas on July 17, Patterson made a demonstration against Johnston's force at Winchester and then fell back to Charlestown, Virginia, thinking he had fulfilled the intent of General Scott's orders. With the terms of his 90 day volunteers about to expire, Patterson felt it was all he could do.

When Johnston's force moved from Winchester via railroad on July 20, Patterson informed Scott of this fact, believing that McDowell had already fought his battle. Committee members had a different interpretation; they believed that Patterson was the primary culprit in the defeat of Union forces at Bull Run. Failing to appreciate any of the circumstances that prevented Patterson from being more aggressive toward Johnston, the committee placed most of the blame for the Union defeat on his shoulders. Most committee members believed that generals such as Patterson, a conservative Democrat with pro-slavery sympathies, were the wrong type of leaders for Union armies.

When it investigated the disastrous Union defeat at Ball's Bluff, where Colonel Edward Baker had been killed, the committee focused on a conservative West Point officer as the culprit, Brigadier General Charles Pomeroy Stone. Colonel Baker had been ordered to the Leesburg, Virginia area to support Colonel Charles Devens Jr., who had been ordered to make a demonstration against Confederate forces at Leesburg with the intent of dislodging Rebel forces in the vicinity. Colonel Devens' regiment had been attacked by Confederate forces under Confederate General Nathan George "Shanks" Evans. Stone had not ordered Baker to cross the river to support Devens, but the inexperienced, political general, most likely eager to make a reputation for himself, ordered soldiers across the river, where they were inexpertly deployed in military formation on top of Ball's Bluff. Baker's command was quickly overwhelmed by Confederate forces, with Baker killed by Rebel fire. As Union forces hastily retreated down the bluff to re-cross the Potomac, they found only few scows available for transportation. Because it took so long to ferry soldiers across, many more Union soldiers became casualties. By the time the engagement was over, nearly one half of the 1,700 men under Baker's command were killed, wounded, or missing.

When the committee began its investigation in early 1862, it did not take long to settle on a scapegoat— Baker's superior, General Stone, who was a conservative West Point general. Not only were there rumors circulating throughout the capital of

suspicious communications that Stone had engaged in with Rebel officers, Stone was also alleged to have returned fugitive slaves to pursuing Rebel masters. Although returning slaves technically met the requirements of the law, it still enraged many of the Republican members of the committee, who sharply questioned Stone about this practice. In fact, Stone claimed to follow War Department directives on the treatment of fugitive slaves, refusing to provide shelter and support for them. However, if he knew that a fugitive slave had been performing work for the Rebel army, he would not turn them over to Rebel officers.

The alleged mysterious communication between Stone and Rebel officers would be the Massachusetts general's undoing. According to one witness before the committee, an aide to Colonel Baker named Captain Francis Young, Stone had given Baker a peremptory order to cross the Potomac and had not provided the Colonel with adequate transportation. In other words, Stone had deliberately sent Baker and his command into a hazardous situation. The problem with Young's account, however, was that he could not produce a copy of the peremptory order. Still committee members were convinced that Stone was the culprit for the disaster. The fate of Baker combined with the mysterious communications with Rebel officers caused committee members to question Stone's loyalty to the Union cause. After placing all the damaging testimony with Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, Stone was eventually arrested on February 8, 1862. Although he was never court-martialed or ever really informed of the exact nature of charges against him, Stone would remain in prison until August 14, 1862. His reputation ruined, Stone resigned his commission in September 1864.

If removing a general of questionable loyalty from the Union high command was part of the committee's job, making sure the army high command was stocked with anti-slavery generals was equally high on the committee's agenda. In November 1861, one of the most prominent anti-slavery advocates in the United States, John C. Frémont, had been removed from his command of the Department of the West. Convinced that Frémont's sacking was the work of pro-slavery members of the West Point clique of army officers, who worked closely with Democratic members of Congress, the committee undertook an extensive investigation of Frémont's tenure in command with the intention of restoring his reputation and securing him another military command.

Why had Frémont been removed from command? Many anti-slavery Republicans assumed that Frémont had run afoul of the Lincoln Administration as the result of his August 30, 1861 proclamation of martial law and emancipation, the latter provision granting freedom to the slaves of southerners in rebellion against the United States government in Frémont's department. In early September, President Lincoln had countermanded the emancipation proclamation because he believed it would have a negative impact on Border States such as Kentucky that remained committed to the institution of slavery. In addition, there were rumors that Frémont's department was rife with corruption, bribery, and waste. An investigation of the House Committee on Government Contracts revealed all sorts of irregularities in procurement practices. When

Lincoln finally decided to relieve Frémont from command in early November 1861, he had sufficient cause.

Republicans on the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, however, were less than satisfied with the removal of Frémont. For anti-slavery radicals such as congressman George Washington Julian, the only reason for Frémont's removal had been his forthright position on slavery. The Lincoln Administration, in his opinion, was being much too cautious on this issue and trying much too hard to appease its political opponents. When the committee took up an investigation of Frémont's command, it did so primarily to restore his reputation and get him a new, prominent position in the Union army. In the opinion of committee members, Frémont, with his anti-slavery views, was the type of military leader they desired to see in important military commands. Even though Frémont's tenure as commander of the West was characterized by inefficiencies and mediocrity, he was a zealous advocate of anti-slavery principles who had directly attacked slavery. For this reason alone, most committee members believed the General needed to be exonerated.

Accordingly, the committee's findings on Frémont were shaped by an undisguised bias in favor of the anti-slavery general. Republican radicals such as Wade, Julian, and Chandler never let the facts get in the way, especially when they might cast a negative light on Frémont. Indeed, in order to further the cause of the general, his testimony before the committee was leaked to the *New York Tribune* and published. When the investigation concluded, the committee and Frémont supporters had brought enough pressure to bear on Lincoln to get Frémont an appointment as commander of the Mountain Department in Virginia, where Frémont would perform dismally against Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson in the Shenandoah campaign later in the spring.

The committee's official findings were published in April 1863. They contained reports on Bull Run, Ball's Bluff, and Frémont's tenure as commander of the West; however, the most sensational portion of the committee's report centered on the operations of the Army of the Potomac, and they were designed to discredit Major General George McClellan as well as the clique of officers in the Army of the Potomac who supported McClellan.

During the winter of 1862-1863, particularly after the disastrous Union defeat at Fredericksburg, committee members worried that supporters of the discredited McClellan had deliberately sabotaged Major General Ambrose Burnside, leading to the disastrous defeat of the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg. When President Lincoln replaced the hapless Burnside with Major General Joseph Hooker, committee members continued to believe that the McClellan clique was out to ruin Hooker. It was thus vitally important to discredit McClellan and those generals sympathetic to him.

When the committee finally published its reports, it squarely placed most of the blame for the failure of Army of the Potomac operations on McClellan. Not only did the committee take issue with the philosophy of McClellan's Peninsula strategy, it also

blamed him for the defeat of Major General John Pope at the Second Battle of Bull Run because McClellan had not reinforced Pope in a timely fashion. Turning to the battle of Fredericksburg, the committee put the blame squarely on McClellan loyalist, Major General William Buell Franklin, arguing that his failure to vigorously launch an attack on the Confederate right prevented Burnside's main assault on Marye's Heights—which most military historians dismiss as ill-conceived and somewhat foolhardy—from achieving the necessary traction to achieve a military victory. Indeed, the committee's final report reinforced the prejudice they took to their investigations. Military training and military science, particularly as demonstrated by West Point trained professionals, counted for little. In some respects, the committee acted as if such training was even a detriment to superior generalship. What really mattered was finding generals who wanted to end slavery and punish the South. These types of officers would invigorate the troops and achieve success on the battlefield.

While the publication of the committee's main report probably did not make an impression on ordinary Americans, it did set off a debate among many of the nation's journalists and opinion makers. Predictably, this debate followed closely along partisan lines, with most Democratic newspapers extremely critical of the committee's findings. Republican newspapers, on the other hand, often took a positive, even flattering view of the committee's work. The *New York Times*, for instance, on April 7, 1863 praised the committee's attack on McClellan, claiming that the committee had demonstrated conclusively that the general “meant peace with the Rebels, and not war against them.” The Democratic *Chicago Times*, on the other hand, dismissed the committee's report as “an abolition document ... principally devoted to assaults upon General McClellan.”

When the 38th session of Congress began in December 1863, the Joint Committee was reappointed in January 1864. Its membership would stay the same with exception of the Democratic Senate spot which was now filled by Senator Benjamin Franklin Harding of Oregon. In addition, Republican representative John Covode retired from Congress with his spot on the committee going to newly elected Republican representative from Missouri, Benjamin Franklin Loan.

Like the activities that preoccupied the committee in the 37th Congress, the examination of all aspects of Union military operations again fell under the committee's purview. In April and May 1864, for instance, committee members Wade and Gooch traveled in Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee to interview survivors and witnesses of the Fort Pillow massacre. On April 12, 1864 Confederate Calvary forces under Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest had overwhelmed a garrison of Union soldiers defending Fort Pillow, an earthen fort that overlooked the Mississippi River north of Memphis, Tennessee. As African-American soldiers of the 6th United States Colored Heavy Artillery and the 2nd United States Colored Light Artillery were brutally slaughtered in the battle, the committee reported these events to the American public in a report that was extremely critical of Confederate actions toward black soldiers in blue.

Similarly, the committee visited Annapolis, Maryland in early May to observe the arrival of Union prisoners of war who had spent time in the Confederate prisons. It published a report on the returned prisoners—complete with photos of emaciated soldiers—together with its report on the Fort Pillow massacre in a single volume on May 6, 1864. Although critics argued that the committee exaggerated Confederate atrocities, the reports had a powerful effect on the northern public and could certainly be cited as a factor in bolstering northern determination to win the war.

Like its work in the 37th Congress, however, the committee found its principal occupation in keeping tabs on the operations of the Army of the Potomac. While it had lobbied vigorously for the replacement of McClellan, when Burnside was defeated at the battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862 and Joseph Hooker suffered an equally humiliating defeat at the battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863, Major General George Gordon Meade was appointed to lead the Army of the Potomac. Because of his association with McClellan, Meade's appointment was not particularly welcomed by members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. Although Meade had achieved an important victory at the Battle of Gettysburg in early July 1863, the committee would launch a major investigation in early 1864 that had two primary purposes: discrediting Meade and removing him from command, while restoring Joseph Hooker to command of the Army of the Potomac.

That the committee did not like Meade was completely understandable, given the committee's anti-West Point prejudices. Although Meade was not particularly close to McClellan, he was lumped together with a group of Army of the Potomac officers who were West Point educated and sympathetic to McClellan's Jominian approach to warfare.

The first task in the committee's investigation was to show how officers like McClellan had, in effect, sabotaged Hooker's Chancellorsville Campaign. Relying primarily on the testimony of close Hooker subordinates and associates such as Major General Daniel Edgar Sickles, a corps commander for Hooker, and Major General Daniel Adams Butterfield, Hooker's chief of staff, the committee crafted an interpretation of the Battle of Chancellorsville much at odds with the facts.

The facts of the campaign were that Hooker, after some bold moves, had taken the initiative and caught his Confederate counterpart, General Robert E. Lee, off guard; however, when he needed to act decisively to press his advantage, Hooker froze under pressure and allowed Lee to launch a crippling flanking attack by Stonewall Jackson. After losing the initiative, Hooker decided his best course of action was retreat. Such witnesses as Sickles and Butterfield, however, claimed that Hooker had been encouraged to retreat by many of the corps commanders in the Army of the Potomac, corps commanders who, in the opinion of Sickles and Butterfield, had never wanted vigorous action against Lee's army. Butterfield told the committee that it was the corps commanders who wanted to retreat, when, in fact, most of the corps commander, with the exception of Sickles and Major General Darius Nash Couch, wanted to stay on the offensive.

Having attempted to rehabilitate the reputation of Hooker with a view toward restoring him to command of the Army of the Potomac, the committee now turned to Meade. Meade had made particular enemies with a number of officers in the Army of the Potomac for either relieving them of command or promoting other officers ahead of them. The committee's investigation offered a forum for settling the score.

Again Butterfield and Sickles provided the most damaging testimony. The latter had earned Meade's ire for positioning his III Corps ahead of the rest of the line of battle on Cemetery Ridge at the Battle of Gettysburg and exposing the Union left to Confederate attack. While Sickles was wounded and lost a leg as a result of the battle, Meade refused to restore him to his old command of the III Corps when he had sufficiently recovered. Butterfield was upset at being relieved from his position of chief of staff of the Army of the Potomac.

Using the testimony of these officers and other disgruntled subordinates, the committee painted an unflattering portrait of Meade's operations at Gettysburg. Butterfield, for instance, testified that Meade had not wanted to confront the enemy at Gettysburg at all and that, even before the battle had ended, he was drawing up a plan of retreat. Additionally, after besting the Army of Northern Virginia, Meade's lackadaisical pursuit, according to some witnesses, allowed Lee's army to escape across the Potomac, when it could have been destroyed prior to crossing. However, perhaps the most damaging testimony the committee uncovered was a barrage of testimony from disgruntled officers that suggested that Meade's loyalty to the Union was questionable and that officers who supported the Peace Democrat or Copperhead point of view always got the plum promotions and assignments in the Army of the Potomac.

Using this unflattering portrait of Meade, committee members next tried to exert influence on the White House and President Lincoln to remove Meade from command. Although Lincoln shared the committee's doubts about Meade when it came to his pursuit of Lee after the Battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln was also cognizant of the fact that Meade had also won a tremendous victory at Gettysburg; moreover, having already experienced Hooker's generalship at Chancellorsville and in the early phases of the Gettysburg campaign, he was not about to turn over the nation's most visible army to an already unsuccessful general. In addition, with the recent appointment of Ulysses S. Grant to lieutenant general and general in chief, Meade would have perpetual oversight as Grant intended to travel with the Army of the Potomac. Hence, an investigation that lasted nearly two months was singularly unsuccessful in accomplishing its objectives.

The committee remained busy for the remainder of the war investigating such diverse matters as the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado, the unsuccessful Red River Campaign led by Major General Nathaniel Prentice Banks, and an examination of government negotiation of ice contracts. The committee spent a major amount of time and investigative resources on examining Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler's failed assault on Fort Fisher with the expressed intent on justifying his inability to take the fortress, a failure that prompted Grant to relieve Butler from command. The

committee ended its tenure with an examination of the so-called Sherman-Johnston peace accord, a peace proposal negotiated by Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, to procure the surrender of the Confederate Army of Tennessee under the command of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston. Since Sherman's agreement was much too lenient, it was quickly overruled by Secretary of War Stanton; however, this did not prevent the committee from launching an investigation that had the expressed intent of portraying General Sherman as a lukewarm patriot who shared the political philosophy of Peace Democrats popularly known as Copperheads.

With the war over, there was obviously no longer a need for the Joint Committee. With the volumes of testimony taken and the numerous reports published, what did it accomplish? Committee members certainly believed that they had played a major role in winning the war, invigorating the armies of the nation, and bringing about more accountability and oversight of Union military operations. Is such an interpretation reasonable?

While it cannot be denied that in some instances, the committee investigations did aid the Union war effort and boost morale—as in, for instance, the investigation of the Fort Pillow Massacre and the treatment of Union prisoners of war—, in many other cases, the committee seemed to act as a powerful distraction to the Union military effort. With its closed sessions, it created a forum where disgruntled or junior officers could take aim at fellow or superior officers. In many cases, the result of a committee investigation was the creation of factionalism within the Union high command, surely not a desirable attribute for a nation at war.

With its simplistic formula for successful military leadership, the committee's investigations were often driven by preposterous assumptions and unrealistic expectations. In many other cases the committee's investigations were little more than second guessing the decisions of military leaders after the fact. Such investigations amounted to little more than finger pointing and, since none of the committee's members were experienced in military matters, nothing productive from a legislative standpoint ever came out of these investigations. While congressional oversight of the executive is a needed and well established element of any well-functioning democracy, the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War did a poor job in carrying out this oversight on behalf of the American people during the Civil War.
