The First Congressional Investigation: St. Clair's Military Disaster of 1791

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With all of the attention focused these days on defense procurement scandals and congressional involvement in military management, it may be useful to recall that events of this nature are nothing new for the United States. Indeed, the story of the first congressional investigation—then and now perhaps the ultimate congressional involvement in executive branch activities—brings to mind Yogi Berra's comment that "It was déjà vu all over again."

The underlying cause of the incident was an expanding wave of civilization. As the decade of the 1780s drew to a close, American settlers moved across the Allegheny Mountains and encroached on Indian-occupied lands in the West, meaning what is now Ohio. The Indians, naturally enough, resented these intrusions by people who moved in, chopped down the trees, planted crops, and otherwise disturbed the existence they had enjoyed for hundreds of years.

Soon enough these first inhabitants of the land resisted violently the incursions of the pale-faced men and women from the east. Warfare—intermittent, bloody, and unacceptable to the settlers—was the result. It did not take long for the demand to go out from them to the federal government: "Send help!"

This was easier asked than done. The Continental Army had been disbanded at the end of the American Revolution, and the entirety of the US Army during the remaining years of the 1780s consisted of a few companies of regulars scattered across a vast territory. Growing troubles with the Indians led Congress in 1790 to authorize an increase in the enlisted strength of the army to 1216 men, organized into an infantry regiment of three battalions of four companies each, plus a separate artillery battalion. Each infantry company consisted of a captain, a lieutenant, an ensign, four sergeants, four corporals, two musicians, and 61 privates. Each battalion headquarters was composed of a major, an adjutant, a surgeon, and a quartermaster.[1]

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Arthur St. Clair was Governor of the Northwest Territory, which embraced the lands north of the Ohio River. He decided to capitalize upon this new troop strength by asking Brigadier General Josiah Harmar, senior officer in the US Army, to lead a punitive expedition against the Indians. Under the authority of President George Washington, Harmar called out 1500 militia to reinforce his regulars. Harmar was an experienced officer, having commanded the First American Regiment from its creation in 1784, but he committed an unpardonable military mistake: he divided his barely adequate forces in the face of the enemy. Traveling in three columns, Harmar's men were defeated in detail by Indian warriors under the leadership of Little Turtle, and Harmar lost 183 killed.[2]

This first attempt at deterrence having failed, Congress authorized in 1791 the creation and recruitment of a second regiment and provided for the enlistment of six-month militiamen. President Washington then appointed Governor St. Clair, who had been a general officer in the Revolutionary War, to the rank of major general and gave him command of a new expedition against a now-confident group of Indians.[3]

Recruitment proceeded slowly, the pay of $3.00 per month (minus $1.00 for clothing and medical expenses) resulting in something less than the highest quality of men being enticed to join the enlisted ranks. A contemporary observed that the men were "purchased from prisons, wheelbarrows, and brothels."[4] Given this inauspicious recruiting effort, it would have helped had the process of outfitting the expedition proceeded with both alacrity and efficiency. Unfortunately, this was not to be. Secretary of War Henry Knox, a Revolutionary War officer whose better days were behind him by 1791, had appointed one Samuel Hodgdon as Quartermaster General. Hodgdon had in turn entered into procurement contracts with a sometime business partner of Knox's, an unscrupulous character named William Duer.[5]

The St. Clair expedition of 1400 men, accompanied by more than a hundred camp followers—including wives and prostitutes—finally departed Ludlow's Station (near present-day Cincinnati) on 17 September 1791 and moved slowly into the wilderness. The cumbersome assortment of troops and their hangers-on marched no more than five or six miles a day, sometimes covering even less distance than that. On the evening of 3 November the

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expedition reached the banks of the Wabash River, where scouts found indications that Indians were nearby.[6]

It was almost dark by this time, and the troops were cold and wet after a day of wading across creeks and slopping through marshes. Not wishing to impose further on his men, the commanding general did not have them throw up breastworks, as he had done on other occasions, nor did he take other precautions for self-defense. An enterprising group of officers, however, took it upon themselves to go out with a volunteer patrol, ambushed a half dozen Indians near camp, and allowed a much larger group of the enemy to pass unchallenged. Despite these indications that hostile forces were near, St. Clair still took no special defensive precautions.[7]

The next day, as St. Clair's troops were preparing breakfast, they were hit by a carefully coordinated attack of some 1000 Indians under Little Turtle—victor over General Harmar—and Blue Jacket. The poorly trained volunteer militia broke and fled, while the regulars attempted a stand. St. Clair's artillerymen, firing both canister and ball, posed the greatest threat to the Indians' success. Little Turtle, however, had anticipated this danger and had assigned men to pick off the gunners. They succeeded in doing so, and before long St. Clair's force was receiving fire from four sides and had no effective way to overcome its growing numerical disadvantage.[8]

The surviving members of St. Clair's command fought on, but within two hours the general—who was unhurt in the battle though he took six bullets through his clothing—decided that the only option was to fight through the encircling enemy. He thereupon gathered about him the remnants of his command and attacked toward the rear of the camp. Two hundred men finally broke out, and St. Clair led this desperate and panic-stricken band 29 miles south to Fort Jefferson. The Indians gave up the chase after a few miles and returned to the scene of their success to plunder and pillage.[9]

The totality of the Indian victory was unprecedented: 657 US soldiers dead and 271 wounded, not counting an unknown number of fatalities among the camp followers. It was a devastating defeat for American arms. It would be the greatest win ever for an Indian army fighting against a US force, far surpassing the better-known victory over George Armstrong Custer's 7th Cavalry 85 years later.[10]

Congress was in session in Philadelphia when word of the disaster filtered back from the field, but for several months it took no action. On 27 March 1792, however, Representative William Branch Giles of Virginia offered a resolution calling upon President Washington to "institute an inquiry into the causes of the late defeat of the army under the command of Major General St. Clair." After a period of debate in which a majority of the speakers made clear their belief that it was not proper to request the President to undertake such an

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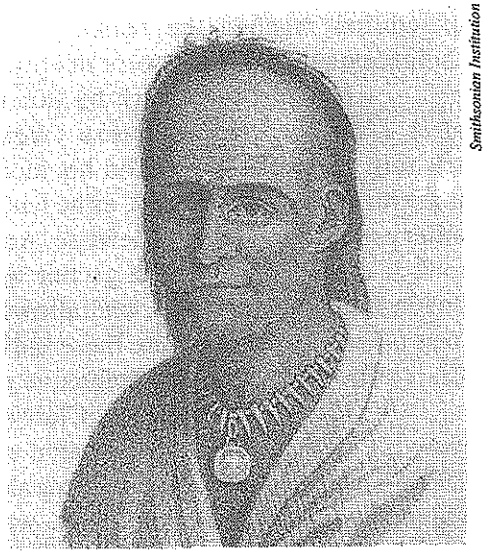
Major General Arthur St. Clair



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Little Turtle

investigation, Giles's motion was defeated 21 to 35. A second resolution establishing a select committee of the House of Representatives to investigate the defeat then passed 44 to 10. This committee was authorized to "call for such persons, papers, and records as may be necessary to assist their inquiries."[11]

President Washington, acutely aware that precedents he established would influence the actions of his successors in office, was concerned about the congressional request for papers on the expedition. On Saturday, 31 March, he assembled his cabinet—Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of War Henry Knox, and Attorney General Edmund Randolph—to seek advice. On the following Monday, the President's men informed him of their unanimous conclusion: the House had every right to conduct its inquiry and to request papers from the President.[12] This conclusion carried extra weight if only because it was backed by both Jefferson and Hamilton, who rarely agreed on anything.

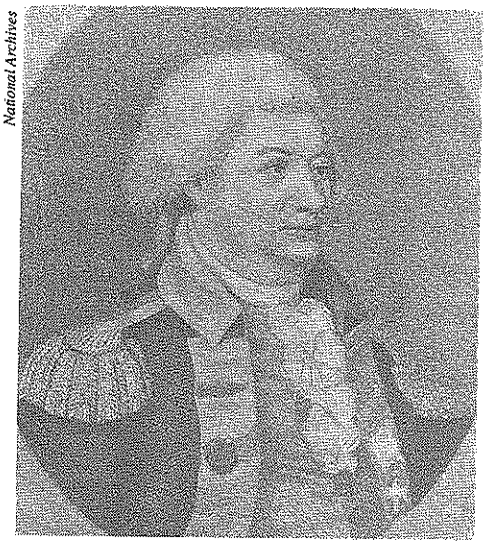
The Cabinet members also recommended that the President give the House such papers as the "public good would permit and ought to refuse those the disclosure of which would harm the public." They suggested further that requests for executive branch documents should be made to the President himself, and not to the head of a department. That same day—2 April—Washington directed that copies of the relevant documents be furnished to the House investigating committee.[13]

The committee, consisting of seven House members, began its work immediately. Witnesses testified under oath at public sessions and were paid $1.00 per day for their time. The committee heard from most of the principals on the US side, including St. Clair and Knox. St. Clair also submitted a lengthy

written statement. The War and Treasury departments provided voluminous records on the expedition, and in barely a month the committee was ready to present its report to the House.[14]

Speaking for the special investigating committee, Representative Thomas Fitzsimons of Pennsylvania delivered the report on 8 May 1792. The committee did not find St. Clair to have been at fault in the defeat. Indeed, the committee found that his conduct "in all preparatory arrangements was marked with peculiar ability and zeal" and that "his conduct during the action furnished strong testimonies of his coolness and intrepidity." Neither did the officers under St. Clair's command come in for censure. The militia, reported the committee, had "fled through the main army without firing a gun," but some of the troops "behaved as well as could be expected from their state of discipline and the suddenness of the attack." The committee placed primary blame on Quartermaster General Hodgdon and his contractors (including William Duer)—and indirectly on Secretary of War Knox—for most of the problems of the expedition.[15]

Contractor fraud was at the heart of many of the problems identified by the investigating committee. "Repeated complaints were made," said the report, "of fatal mismanagements and neglects, in the quartermaster's and military stores department, particularly as to tents, knapsacks, camp kettles, cartridge boxes, packsaddles &c. all of which were deficient in quantity and bad in quality." The committee found specifically that the packsaddles and many of the muskets were unfit for use, that the gunpowder "was not of good quality," and that the shoes, hats, and clothing supplied to the expedition were of shoddy construction, the shoes lasting only four days in some instances. Even the axes furnished the expedition were inferior, one officer testifying that "when used [they] would bend up like a dumpling."[16]



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Secretary of War Henry Knox

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Quartermaster Samuel Hodgdon

The House did not act immediately upon the committee report, and Knox took advantage of the delay to stage a public counteroffensive. Complaining that the committee report had been "founded upon an *ex parte* [one-sided] investigation," he complained that the report had been leaked to the press, thereby unfairly injuring his reputation. Knox requested that he be allowed to explain his side of the story to the House before it voted on accepting the committee's report. He thereupon presented a detailed rebuttal of more than a hundred pages, together with a sheaf of affidavits which contradicted the charges that the organizers and suppliers of the expedition were guilty of malfeasance or worse.[17]

In a counter-rebuttal of his own, General St. Clair pointed out the questionable validity of the affidavits. All but two of them, he observed, were in the same handwriting—that of Hodgdon's clerk—and most of them were from contractors whose work had been questioned. "Would the tent maker . . . come forward," asked St. Clair, "and swear that he had imposed upon the public, or the gunsmith that he had done his work unfaithfully?" No, said St. Clair, they would undoubtedly swear that they had given good value in their contracts, despite convincing evidence to the contrary.[18]

As for Hodgdon's claims, St. Clair found them to be "so replete with insolence and folly, that to make large remarks upon them would only serve to place those qualities in a less conspicuous point of view." The general nevertheless offered a ten-page refutation of Hodgdon's statement, concluding with the observation that the Quartermaster General wanted only to turn public attention away from himself. "He is, I trust, mistaken," opined St. Clair; "the public may be misled, but they are never long wrong, and want nothing but the truth fairly laid before them, to be always right."[19]

St. Clair's faith in the public probably did not in the end extend to the members of the House of Representatives. After considering all the claims, counterclaims, and additional conflicting testimony, the investigating committee issued a watered-down version of their original report which softened the criticisms of Hodgdon, though it gave no relief to Knox. In 1793 a new session of Congress briefly considered the issue, then discharged the committee without taking any further action.[20]

St. Clair felt that his reputation had been tarnished by the failure of the House to accept the report, and he lobbied unsuccessfully to reopen the matter. As an old man he attempted to persuade the House to publish a collection of documents on the affair, and when that attempt failed, he published by subscription his own 275-page volume.[21]

The St. Clair expedition is today a little-known episode in American history, though it resulted in a defeat which fairly well wiped out the US Army at the time. More important, the investigation of the incident by the US House of Representatives set the pattern and the precedent for congressional inquiries into executive branch operations of all types. St. Clair was largely

exonerated by the House investigating committee, but it is apparent that he made a number of mistakes which contributed materially to the disaster—mistakes, incidentally, that continue to have application today:

• He underestimated his enemy. Despite the defeat suffered by his predecessor, General Harmar, St. Clair seems to have suffered from a common military syndrome: opponents without the latest in weaponry cannot possibly be as good as we are. Little Turtle, on the other hand, realized that he was at a disadvantage in firepower—principally because of St. Clair's artillery—and made plans to overcome the deficit.

• In failing to have his men do what was prudentially required for their safety and survival (digging in when they reached the Wabash) because it was uncomfortable and inconvenient, St. Clair violated a cardinal rule of defense. If he had ordered his men to throw up even hasty breastworks or prepare modest entrenchments on the night of 3 November, his command might have survived the next day largely intact.

• He did not act on the intelligence that was furnished him. Patrols had detected the presence of the enemy nearby, and many of his officers believed that an attack was likely. Intelligence reports are often ambiguous, but that does not seem to have been the case here.

There are also some non-tactical lessons from this expedition and its aftermath that have contemporary application:

• Do not count on your troops to rise above their level of training. The "volunteer militia" recruited for St. Clair were considerably below the level of the regulars in both training and motivation. They might more appropriately be compared to untrained draftees rather than to members of today's Guard and Reserve. Nevertheless, as more and more assignments are handed off to the Reserve components for budgetary reasons, it is important for national leaders to realize that 48 paid drills and two weeks of active duty per year may not allow Reservists to consistently achieve the level of performance that can be reached by those on full-time active duty. Army Reserve units performed admirably in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969, at times outperforming their active-duty counterparts. These units, however, had received anywhere from three to seven months of intensive post-mobilization training before being sent to Vietnam.[22]

• Some defense contractors will cut corners in supplying materiel no matter what the consequences. Whether it is steel axes that bend like dumplings in 1791 or steel bolts that shear under stress in 1990, procurement and quality-control specialists must be ever vigilant. Most defense contractors are simply trying to make an honest profit, but that small percentage that cares only for profit and forgets the modifier "honest" can cause equipment failures and unnecessary casualties and losses.

• Congress will not hesitate to become deeply involved—even to micromanage—if it feels that the Department of Defense and the services are

not doing their job. Having worked as a US Senate staffer for almost six years, I can say with a high degree of confidence that few staff members or their bosses really enjoy mucking around at a nit-picking level in DOD. Most of them have plenty of larger issues on which to concentrate, but if they perceive that commanders, managers, auditors, and inspectors in the Department of Defense are not doing a proper job of watching the taxpayer's money, then they will not hesitate to step in.

Whether by reading Sun Tzu, taking a staff ride at Gettysburg, or pondering the lessons of Chief Little Turtle, today's military leaders can learn from the past. Defeats are often as important as victories for such purposes. The story of Arthur St. Clair's expedition and the first congressional investigation has value still—and a remarkably contemporary ring to it—even after the elapse of two hundred years.

NOTES

1. Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, enlarged edition (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), p. 90.
2. Ibid., pp. 82, 90-91; George C. Chalou, "St. Clair's Defeat, 1792," in *Congress Investigates: A Documented History, 1792-1974*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Roger Bruns (New York: Chelsea House, 1983), Vol. I, p. 5.
3. Weigley, p. 91.
4. Quoted in Weigley, p. 91.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.; Chalou, p. 7.
7. James Ripley Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U.S. Army, 1783-1812* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 99-101; Harvey Lewis Carter, *The Life and Times of Little Turtle: First Sagamore of the Wabash* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 107.
8. Chalou, p. 7; Ripley, p. 105; Carter, p. 106.
9. Chalou, p. 7; Ripley, p. 109; Carter, p. 107.
10. Chalou, p. 4.
11. *Annals of Congress*, 2d Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1855), pp. 490-94; Chalou, pp. 9-11, 12.
12. Chalou, p. 4.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., pp. 10-11.
15. "Causes of the Failure of the Expedition against the Indians in 1791, under the command of Major General St. Clair," *American State Papers*, Class V, Military Affairs, Vol. I, pp. 36-39, Document No. 5.
16. Ibid.; Arthur St. Clair, *A Narrative of the Manner in which the Campaign against the Indians, in the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred and Ninety-one, was Conducted, under the Command of Major General Arthur St. Clair* (Philadelphia: 1812), p. 207.
17. Chalou, pp. 14, 15, 17.
18. St. Clair, p. 90.
19. Ibid., pp. 136, 146.
20. Chalou, p. 17.
21. St. Clair.
22. Richard B. Crossland and James T. Currie, *Twice the Citizen: A History of the United States Army Reserve, 1908-1983* (Washington: Office of the Chief, Army Reserve, 1984), pp. 277-90.