

## Congress' First Investigation: General St. Clair's Defeat



Portrait of General Arthur St. Clair by Charles Wilson Peale, 1782.

(Source: Independence National History Museum, Philadelphia)

The very first oversight investigation undertaken by the U.S. Congress occurred in 1792, just three years after the U.S. Constitution took effect. The inquiry dug into a significant U.S. military defeat, while also setting an important example in which the executive branch cooperated with a congressional oversight investigation.

At the time, the newly formed United States was expanding westward, and settlers in the Northwest Territory increasingly came into conflict with Native Americans living there. In 1791, Congress authorized a new **regiment** to address the conflicts and provided funding to enlist **militia** for six months. President George Washington appointed Arthur St. Clair to serve as Major General of the new regiment and tasked him with designing and executing an effective battle plan.

From the start, there were difficulties in recruiting soldiers due to low pay. Secretary of War Henry Knox had appointed Samuel Hodgdon as **Quartermaster General** for the military. Mr. Hodgdon signed contracts with a prominent but dishonest businessman, William Duer, whose failure to provide necessary items slowed the expedition at every step — including the

late supply of uniforms, a lack of guns and tools, and scarce rations (among other problems).

The regiment moved slowly through present-day Ohio and did not make it to

**Regiment:** A military unit.

**Militia:** A temporary military force that is raised from the civil population to support a regular army during an emergency.

**Quartermaster General:** The head of the department of the army that deals with providing housing and equipment for the troops.

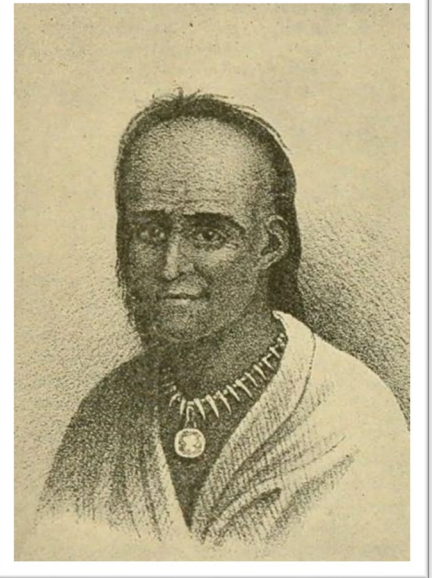
its final destination on the banks of the Wabash River until November 3, 1791 — months later than anticipated.

The next morning, 1,000 Native Americans from the Shawnee, Miami, and Delaware tribes, led by War Chiefs Mihšihkinaahkwa (“Little Turtle”) of the Miami Tribe and

Weyapiersenwah (“Blue Jacket”) of the Shawnee tribe, descended on the camp. Many of the volunteer militia fled, and though some soldiers tried to fight, Little Turtle’s forces overwhelmed General St. Clair’s regiment. After 2 hours of brutal attack, General St. Clair commanded the surviving troops to retreat.

What would become known as the Battle of the Wabash was the worst defeat of U.S. forces by Native Americans in U.S. history. Over 650 U.S. soldiers were killed and more than 270 were wounded. Native Americans suffered approximately 100 casualties.

The defeated army returned to Fort Washington on November 8, and a furious President Washington was informed of the defeat the next day. Secretary Knox reported to Congress that the late season and poorly trained soldiers were to blame for the terrible defeat.



Mihšihkinaahkwa “Little Turtle” by Gilbert Stuart circa 1798  
(Source: public domain)

**Resolution:** A piece of legislation introduced in the House or Senate, limited to affect only Congress.

**Precedent:** A prior ruling or judgment that may influence future proceedings.

In the House of Representatives, a motion to form a committee to investigate the military defeat was made on February 2, 1792. On March 27, 1792, Representative Giles introduced a **resolution** requesting an inquiry by President Washington to uncover the cause of the loss. And so began the debate that would spark the first congressional investigation in the nation's history.

Because the Constitution is silent on the power of Congress to conduct oversight, the members of the Second Congress had to determine what authority, if any, they possessed to investigate another branch of government and how to proceed. The debate included several Founding Fathers then serving in the House of Representatives. Aware that their actions would set a **precedent** for future congressional oversight, many members of Congress weighed in.

At the conclusion of the debate, Representative Giles' resolution to request an inquiry from the President was defeated. A special House committee was then established to investigate the matter, with Representative Fitzsimons as the Chair.

Three days later, on March 30, 1792, the committee made its first request for documents to Secretary Knox. Mr. Knox, in turn, sent the request to the President with a letter asking permission to submit the documents to Congress. President Washington, aware that his actions would set a precedent, met with his department heads (now known as the Cabinet) — Knox, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and Edmund Jennings Randolph — to determine the appropriate response to the committee's requests.

According to notes by Secretary of State and future President Thomas Jefferson, the Cabinet agreed that the Washington Administration should cooperate with the congressional inquiry. These notes made clear that both branches of government believed Congress had the authority to investigate government actions. The statement that the President should provide records "as the public good would permit" also created the basis for executive privilege that still exists today. Despite this privilege, President Washington decided that he would allow the committee access to all requested documents, but that the originals could not be taken from the departments. President Washington also permitted the department heads to testify before the committee.

The House committee held several days of public hearings. Along with the department heads, several military officers testified, including General St. Clair. After taking testimony and reviewing the evidence, the committee drafted and issued Congress' first oversight report.

The report concluded that Brigadier General Butler had not failed in his responsibilities to recruit an adequate number of troops, but that transportation of those troops had been delayed due to mismanagement by the Quartermaster General and contractor. The report found that General St. Clair had been forced to perform the duties of quartermaster in addition to his own and noted that he had taken on the extra duties with responsibility and care.

The committee report concluded that the principal causes of the military failure were delays in obtaining supplies, mismanagement and neglect by the Quartermaster and contractor Duer, and a lack of experienced and disciplined troops. On February 26, 1793, the report was formally presented to the House, and the investigative committee was



*"Washington and his Cabinet" lithograph by Currier & Ives, held by Library of Congress (Source: public domain)*

dissolved. The committee's work led to several changes. First, Quartermaster General Hodgson was removed from his position, demonstrating that a congressional investigation could cause an executive branch official to be held accountable for mismanagement. Second, battle lessons learned led to administrative reforms producing a more centralized, well-trained, and logistically supported U.S. military.

Equally important, this early precedent, acknowledged by senior members of both the legislative and executive branches, made clear that Congress had the authority to investigate actions taken by the federal government, acquire agency documents, take sworn testimony, and produce a report with detailed factual findings and recommendations. The 1792 investigation of General St. Clair's Defeat led the way for government oversight by every Congress to come.

**Learn more about St. Clair's Defeat and the first Congressional investigation:**

- [A Narrative of the Manner of the Campaign Against the Indians Under the Command of Major General St. Clair, by Major General St. Clair \(1812\)](#)
- [Congressional Inquiries are Nearly as Old as the Constitution](#)
- [Remembering St. Clair's Defeat](#)
- [St. Clair's Campaign of 1791: A Defeat in the Wilderness That Helped Forge Today's U.S. Army](#)
- [Congress Investigates: A Critical and Documentary History, Volume One, Chapter One by the Robert C. Byrd Center](#)
- [Levin Center Portraits in Oversight: General St. Clair's Defeat](#)