

Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

While some small-scale military operations took place in early December 1861, the most important activities surrounded the meeting of the Second Session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress of the United States, which convened in Washington, D.C. on December 2. Following President Lincoln's State of the Union message on December 3, the House and Senate took up several items of business. Senator John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky, former Vice President of the United States during the Buchanan Administration, had remained in his seat throughout the first months of the war. He had supported the right of secession, but his native state of Kentucky had initially declared neutrality rather than secede. In September, following the decision of the state government to support the Union, Breckenridge left the state and joined the Confederate Army as a brigadier general. On December 4 his former colleagues in the U.S. Senate voted 36 to 0 to expel Breckenridge, calling him "'the traitor,' [who] had 'joined the enemies of his country.'" The former vice president would have a distinguished military career in the southern army, rising to major general before finishing the war as Confederate Secretary of War. At the conflict's close he conducted a harrowing yet successful flight through Florida to Cuba and ultimately Europe.

On December 5 congress, with delegates from most of the slave-owning states no longer attending, allowed the introduction of bills and petitions to end slavery in the rebelling states. Congress had already in August 1861 passed the First Confiscation Act, which authorized the president to seize the property of those in rebellion, and on December 5 Senator Lyman Trumbull introduced a second, stronger Confiscation Act, demonstrating the growing support in the northern congress for a policy of emancipation.

Finally, on December 9, the Senate approved 33 to 3 the establishment of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, a committee created to investigate various issues related to the prosecution of the war, including “such matters as illicit trade with the Confederate states, medical treatment of wounded soldiers, military contracts, and the causes of Union battle losses.” The House of Representatives approved a similar measure the following day, and the committee began its deliberations shortly thereafter.

The committee was established in the aftermath of Union defeats such as Bull Run and Ball’s Bluff. Republicans dominated the committee, with prominent members including Benjamin Wade of Ohio, Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, George Julian of Indiana, and, initially, Democratic Senator Andrew Johnson of Tennessee. Its establishment was an attempt by the legislative branch to exert influence on the executive department’s prosecution of the war. The committee remained in existence until the war’s end, examining a wide variety of issues, including various Union military defeats, as well alleged atrocities and the Confederate treatment of Union prisoners, Union military administration, government military contracts, contraband trade in Union-occupied areas of the south, the production of heavy weapons and naval warships, General William Sherman’s negotiations in accepting the surrender of Confederate forces in North Carolina at the end of the war, and even the massacre of American Indians in the west. While its hearings proved sometimes embarrassing to the Lincoln Administration, in retrospect it did little to seriously hamper the Union war effort.