THE SECESSION WINTER AND
THE COMMITTEE OF FIVE

BY FRED NICKLASON

THE secession winter of 1860-61 posed serious policy problems for Republicans. A political dilemma arose from their dual but frequently contradictory obligations as supporters of their political party on the one hand and of the Union on the other. As Republican party members they took a political and often partisan position, criticized President Buchanan, and blamed the Democrats for failing to prevent the secession movement. As Unionists they declined to provoke the South, strategically recognizing that saving the Union depended less on action than upon moderate, non-coercive, almost moribund inactivity. Consequently, as Republicans they took a principled, "hard" but merely rhetorical position. As Unionists they necessarily followed a practical, "soft" line of ambivalence and unspoken imitation of Buchanan's policies. And as December passed into the new year the increasingly frightening possibility that southern threats might lead to actual war drove Republicans to dampen their rhetoric in favor of quiet, watchful waiting. By March 4 the party was practically immobile.

The history of a little-known committee in the secession crisis illustrates these generalizations. By December, 1860, rumors in the North had taken three forms—that southern rebels plotted to capture Washington in January, prevent the electoral college from voting in February, or assassinate Abraham Lincoln in March. Any truth in these conspiratorial rumors required more than the official policy of delay. "Masterly inactivity" was no longer enough. As a result, Republican leaders, taking at least some precautionary action, set up the select House "committee of five" to investigate any possible threat to Union interests.

The committee had a strange beginning. On December 29, 1860, two days after he officially entered upon his duties as

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THE SECESSION WINTER

Attorney General, Edwin M. Stanton, a Democrat, secretly contacted New York Republican Senator William H. Seward to reveal information about President Buchanan's confidential cabinet meetings. Seward and fellow Republicans took immediate advantage of Stanton's unsolicited duplicity. In the next days, between December 29, 1860, and January 2, 1861, as Michigan Representative William A. Howard later told it, loyal cabinet members requested the formation of a congressional committee to investigate treason against the Union. Stanton drafted the resolution for the committee and, upon the urging of unidentified congressmen and senators, Howard accepted its chairmanship. This select House committee of five members was to investigate several matters: whether any executive officer was conniving with southerners for the federal surrender of forts or had pledged not to reinforce forts in Charleston harbor; what reinforcements of these forts had been made and if none, why; where United States ships were stationed and under what orders; and who was responsible for the seizure of public buildings in Charleston and the capture of revenue cutters. The intent of the resolution was obvious. Buchanan had already talked to commissioners from South Carolina about the Charleston forts, and Republican leaders feared such talk might lead to further leniency toward southern secession.

On January 2, in an effort to prepare the way for the prospective committee, Republicans Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania,...
Pennsylvania and John Sherman of Ohio disparaged the cumbersome "Committee of Thirty-three"—the previously established House committee to prevent war—but when parliamentary procedure prevented Howard from presenting his resolution Republican leaders delayed pressing the matter until after President Buchanan's special message to Congress, expected the same day. Day after day the message was withheld until January 8 when the shaken chief executive publicly confessed that the sectional crisis had gone beyond his control. He left mediation to Congress alone. Turning Buchanan's weakness to Republican advantage, Howard deftly moved that the House refer the presidential message to the five man committee he had proposed a week earlier. With Republicans, Union Democrats and southern conservatives supporting Howard's resolution, the House passed it by a vote of 133 to 62. Only minor protest arose during the roll call. Missouri Democrat John S. Phelps remarked that while the President had invited Congress to adjust disputes, the resolution merely authorized the committee to "indict somebody." Phelps was right, but more important to Republicans was their warning to the Democratic administration that no future move by it or the South could long remain unrevealed.

Speaker William Pennington then appointed "The Select Committee on the Special Message of the President of January 8, 1861"—otherwise known as the "committee of five," the "treason committee," the "committee of public safety," the "Howard committee," or as one of its own members called it, the "Dawes committee." As its members Speaker Pennington selected Howard, Massachusetts Republican Henry L. Dawes, New York Democrat John R. Reynolds, Union Democrat John Cochrane of New York, and Democrat Laurence O'Bryan Branch of North Carolina, the only southern member.

The "committee of five" was officially intended as a peace-seeking body and took over such matters as Buchanan's corre-

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1 Ibid., 231, 235; Springfield Republican, January 2, 3, 1861.
2 Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess. (January 9, 1861), 295. Buchanan's message is dated January 8; it was transmitted to Congress the next day.
3 Ibid., 295-296.
4 Ibid., January 10, 1861, 316. Reynolds replaced Pennsylvania Democrat John Hickman, the original appointee, who withdrew. The author is presently working on a biography of Dawes.
spondence with South Carolina commissioners, petitions in support of compromise proposals, and numerous resolutions on the sectional crisis—all previously the concern of the “Committee of Thirty-three.” The new committee also received assignments not previously delegated to any other committee, such as an investigation of the removal of arms from federal arsenals. Yet Howard and his colleagues, following their own sense of responsibility in the crisis, largely ignored these official duties. Reynolds prepared a bill for nationalizing the militia. Cochrane worked on a bill for the collection of duties in southern ports.

Howard and Dawes began an investigation of the Navy. Branch, the fifth member, usually opposed the work of the other four.

As the only two Republican members on the committee, Howard and Dawes performed work about which even their committee colleagues knew nothing. Stanton, having conceived of the committee, now gave Howard and Dawes secret information relative to the committee’s de facto assignment. Republican John F. (“Bowie Knife”) Potter of Wisconsin even claimed that Stanton supplied facts for articles of impeachment of President Buchanan. Whether Stanton ever did so is unknown. What is known is that Howard and Dawes daily received unsigned messages from Stanton concerning legal rights, definitions of treason, and instances of what Stanton took to be

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9 House Journal, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 163. Other resolutions included the suspension of Federal laws in the South; a repeal of the act regulating the collection of duties in certain ports of South Carolina; a resolution to consider the portion of Buchanan’s January 8 message recommending a vote of the people on the questions between North and South; and a resolution for taking the sense of the people on amendments to the Constitution. Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess. (January 14, 1861), 363-364; ibid. (January 28, 1861), 597-598.


12 Frank Abial Flower, Edwin McMasters Stanton: The Autocrat of Rebellion, Emancipation, and Reconstruction (Akron, Ohio, 1905), 89.
treasonable acts. The methods of contact were in the tradition of intrigue: Howard and Dawes would be informed, somehow, where messages could be found and where they must be returned. They often read their communications late at night by the light of a street lamp, and they returned them to the place of deposit—apparently even in hollow trees.\(^3\)

One of Stanton's first secret messages implicated Isaac Toucey, Secretary of the Navy, whose loyalty Stanton questioned. On January 12 Commodore James Armstrong had surrendered the Pensacola naval yard to commissioners of the Governor of Florida and a citizens' militia of Alabamans; the manner of the surrender became known and Stanton denounced it in a cabinet meeting. "That night," Dawes later wrote, "I read in the handwriting that had already become familiar these words: 'There is a Northern traitor in the cabinet. Arrest him tonight. Pensacola has been given up. Stop him before it is too late.'"\(^4\)

Lacking the power of arrest, the committee called Toucey before its closed hearings on two different occasions. There Toucey revealed that while he had instructed Commodore Armstrong to be vigilant in the protection of public property he nevertheless considered the bloodless loss of Pensacola a small price to pay for keeping peace.\(^5\) Dawes, responding with incredulity, took the lead to press the matter beyond the loss of Pensacola. In his committee report Dawes first unmercifully attacked Toucey for his failure to station enough ships within immediate reach to carry out his orders to protect the Union flag at every point on the Atlantic seaboard. Using Toucey's own evidence, Dawes showed that of the entire navy on January 16 only two ships lay at anchor ready for service and one of these was but a storeship under orders to sail for Africa. Dawes further pointed out that not one of the twenty-eight ships lying in port could be fit for service within several weeks. Toucey, moreover, had not ordered a single ship repaired, although over $646,000 in


\(^4\) H. L. Dawes, "Washington the Winter Before the War," 163.

appropriations for repairs remained unexpended. Nevertheless, Dawes's southern colleague, Branch, defended Toucey in a minority report. Branch admitted that only two ships lay at anchor, but pointed to the more important fact that of the eleven ships in the home squadron eight were in coastal waters or under orders for the coast. Not content with having made that legitimate point, Branch overstated his case, arguing that Toucey deserved commendation rather than censure for his lack of action. Branch declared that Toucey's strict economy of expenditures, unlike the loose practices of other department heads, was virtuous. The times, however, were not regular. Even after President Buchanan had admitted that he could not meet the dangers to the Union, Toucey had too few ships at his immediate disposal, no ships under repair, and unspent appropriations of over one half million dollars on his hands. This, Dawes charged, was "without justification and excuse."

Dawes thought his second accusation of Toucey more serious, and less forgiveable. By accepting—"without delay or inquiry"—the resignations of southern naval officers, Toucey had enabled them to avoid otherwise certain courts-martial for treason. For this "grave error" Dawes charged that Toucey deserved the censure of the House. Branch again objected, arguing that the "committee of five" had no power to investigate the propriety of Toucey's acceptance of resignations and that, in resigning, the southern officers had fulfilled a duty to their states. The time was past, however, when a southerner could carry any weight, and the House voted 95 to 62 to censure Toucey.

Neither Toucey nor Buchanan felt "the slightest ground for anxiety" about their handling of the naval force at the time of the secession crisis. Toucey intentionally did not call in ships

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1 House Report No. 87, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 1-6, 12-14.
17 Ibid., 6. Dawes's evidence has been called "flimsy." Kenneth M. Stampp, And the War Came; The North and the Secession Crisis, 1860-61 (Chicago, 1950), 121. Yet a later incriminating examination of the state of the navy on March 4, 1861, supports Dawes's case. On that date, of the forty-two vessels and 7,000 men in naval commission, only twelve vessels with 2,000 men were in the home squadron, and of these only four small vessels with 280 men were in northern ports. "Report of the Secretary of the Navy" (July 4, 1861), Congressional Globe, 37 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix 7.
18 House Report No. 87, 6-11, 14.
19 Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess. (March 2, 1861), 1424.
from foreign waters, he later wrote to Buchanan, because "It was the cardinal point of your policy to preserve the peace of the country." Nor need Toucey and Buchanan have felt contrite for their actions. Before adjournment Republicans made no unusual appropriation for the navy, nor did Dawes recommend it. Instead, Republicans remained satisfied with only hawkishly scolding Democrats for failing to take the very action they themselves were unwilling to take. Yet Republicans had no monopoly on duplicity. For, while Buchanan later publicly complained that the Senate's refusal to accept his nominee for the Charleston collectorship had tied his hands, he privately admitted that had the Senate confirmed the nomination "the war would probably have commenced in January."21

Between the investigation of the navy in January and the censure of Toucey in late February, a more dramatic and elusive investigation interrupted the committee's original tasks. On January 26 Seward drafted and Pennsylvania Representative Galusha A. Grow introduced a resolution instructing the "committee of five" to investigate rumors that southern troops intended to attack the capital, to capture the public archives, and to declare themselves the legal government.22 Specifically, the new resolution directed the committee to inquire "whether any secret organization hostile to the government of the United States exists in the District of Columbia," and whether any officer of the city of Washington or of the executive or judicial departments of the federal government was involved.23

Living with edgy nerves for weeks, the committee searched feverishly for evidence beyond hearsay. It was not an easy task. The rumor of treason often became as substantial in their minds

20 I. Toucey to J. Buchanan, July 31, 1861; May 25, 1864; J. Buchanan to I. Toucey, December 6, 1862, all quoted in George Ticknor Curtis, Life of James Buchanan, II (New York, 1883), 515-516, 600, 621. Toucey has been unsatisfactorily defended by Philip Gerald Auchampaugh in James Buchanan and His Cabinet on Eve of Secession (Lancaster, Pa., 1926), 85-86.
21 [James Buchanan], Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion (New York, 1866), 159; J. Buchanan to Horatio King, September 13, 1861, Horatio King Papers.
23 Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess. (January 26, 1861), 572. Two days later the House by a vote of 120 to 42 passed a bill to provide "more effectively" for the militia in the District of Columbia. Ibid., 605-606.
as treason itself, a southern desire and threat to capture Washington became indistinguishable from an actual plot. Yet in early 1861 fear of the capture of Washington was no more absurd than the fear of secession, and Republicans cannot without justice be scorned for feeling it.

When in early January the “committee of five” began its investigation of a southern plot, an abundance of evidence had already appeared in the public press. In a first wave of fear in late December and early January many pro-southern newspapers, North and South, had espoused something comparable to threats of the late 1850’s. On December 18, 1860, the Richmond Enquirer explicitly urged authorities in Maryland and Virginia to prevent the inauguration of Lincoln. The New York Day Book elaborated on this revolutionary idea and rallied southerners to “save the republic of Washington from the taint of niggerism—they must expel Lincoln and his free-nigger horde from the federal district.” The Washington Evening Star, on the other hand, made light of threats to the capital and chided both the Richmond Enquirer for advocating treason and the New York Tribune for suggesting a counter northern “invasion” of Washington to protect Lincoln. But such calm voices were seldom heard. Beyond editorials, partisan newspapers printed each piece of inflammatory information relevant to the crisis and informed the public of each threat to the capital. The Washington correspondent of the New York Herald reported that several thousand men stood ready to take the capital. The Springfield Republican repeated the statement of Ogilvie Byron Young, the “chain-lightning” orator, who swore that if the South did not prevent Lincoln’s inauguration he would “plunge the dagger to the innermost depths of the craven heart of the perjured knave.” The Republican’s Washington correspondent reported Texas Senator Louis T. Wigfall’s open threat that “the

26 Washington Evening Star, January 2, 1861.
capital would be in the hands of the secessionists before Inauguration Day" and the similar declaration of Georgia Senator Alfred Iverson, Sr. "Wait six weeks," ran the typical southern threat, "and then see who has possession of this capital."27

As the most interested members of the "committee of five," Howard and Dawes of course needed something more explicit than newspaper threats or reports of them. Yet beyond newspaper items the turn of the year had brought them little evidence to investigate. True, young Henry Adams in December recognized that "the people of Washington are firmly convinced that there is to be an attack on Washington," and upon returning from Richmond, Ohio Democrat Clement L. Vallandigham declared that Lincoln's inauguration would be prevented by force.28 Still, like the newspaper reports, the vague Republican beliefs, no matter how firmly held, and the dire Democrat threats, no matter how vigorously expressed, could not establish authoritative evidence of an actual danger to Washington.

Reports of southern aggression on the capital acquired a more authentic tone only after Stanton contacted Seward on December 29. At the same time that Seward informed Lincoln about his peephole to cabinet meetings, he told the President-elect that "a plot is forming to seize the capital on or before the 4th of March, and this, too, has its accomplices in the public councils." Seward also informed Thurlow Weed that he wrote "not from rumors but knowledge."29 Since Seward's knowledge came from Stanton, it must be assumed that Stanton heard such talk (or said he did) in the cabinet or in his many social contacts with Democrats, or both. Still, Stanton's information never seemed to lead Dawes and Howard beyond accusations of individuals. Nor did other sources add much. Henry Adams, through his father Charles Francis Adams, a confidant of Seward, pri-

27 New York Herald, January 1, 1861; Springfield Republican, January 3, 4, 1861.
29 W. H. Seward to A. Lincoln, December 29, 1860, R. T. Lincoln Collection; W. H. Seward to T. Weed, December 29, 1860, quoted in Thurlow Weed Barnes, Memoir of Thurlow Weed (Boston, 1884), 315.
vately reported Joseph Lane of Oregon in charge of the conspiracy, and Caleb Cushing, a pro-southern Massachusetts Democrat, an accomplice. Thurlow Weed could do no more than include John Floyd and Henry Wise in the rumored conspiracy of late December, but even this was not news to Washingtonians; everyone knew that Wise’s son-in-law, one Dr. Garnet, had continuously asserted that Wise planned to take possession of the city with 25,000 minute men. Apparently on the basis of this information Maryland Governor Thomas H. Hicks on January 3 declared that secession leaders in Washington had resolved to seize the capital and the public archives immediately. The next day Charles Francis Adams informed Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew that the southern plot still existed and would be consummated sometime before March 4. Adams urged Andrew to organize the Massachusetts militia on a provisional basis. From Adams’ colleagues in Washington, authorities in New York and Pennsylvania received comparable suggestions.

Then, in early January, General Winfield Scott marched troops about the streets of Washington, the local militia was organized and the first wave of fear in Washington eased. As early as January 2, Charles Sumner felt that the “sense of insecurity here seems to have passed away,” and Henry Adams reported that Washington had just escaped a “cursed dangerous plot.” That a catastrophe was avoided Sumner on January 9 attributed to Buchanan’s and Scott’s actions, and the next day both Thurlow Weed and Illinois Republican Senator Lyman Trumbull

30 H. Adams to C. F. Adams, Jr., January 2, 1861, Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, 1858-1891, 76. Massachusetts Republican Samuel Hooper also reported the rumor about Cushing to Nathaniel P. Banks, Hooper to Banks, February 1, 1861, Nathaniel P. Banks Papers, Library of Congress. 31 T. Weed to A. Lincoln, January 10, 1861, R. T. Lincoln Collection; Daniel Aumen to S. P. Chase, January 18, 1861, S. P. Chase Papers. 32 George L. P. Radcliffe, Governor Thomas H. Hicks of Maryland and the Civil War (Baltimore, 1902), 43-44. Charles Francis Adams to John A. Andrew, January 4, 1861, quoted in Henry G. Pearson, The Life of John A. Andrew: Governor of Massachusetts, 1861-1865 (Boston, 1904), II, 142-143. 33 Charles Sumner to J. A. Andrew, January 2, 1861, quoted in WorthINGTON ford, ”Sumner’s Letters to Governor Andrew, 1861,” Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, LX (April, 1927), 226; H. Adams to C. F. Adams, Jr., January 2, 1861, Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, 1858-1891, 76. See also Leonard Swett to Abraham Lincoln, January 5, 1861, R. T. Lincoln Collection.
informed Lincoln that the conspiracy had collapsed.34 Dawes’s wife, reflecting her husband’s opinion, wrote a friend that the decisive actions taken by Buchanan and Scott had caused the abandonment of southern plans to take the capital.35 Students at the University of Virginia testified to Scott’s effectiveness by hanging him in effigy.36

This crisis of fear having passed, another followed in less than two weeks. As late as January 21 Seward, Sumner and Scott all felt that the plot against the city had ended, but the next day Scott received information which, Sumner wrote, confirmed “the idea that there is a widespread conspiracy.”37 Three days later, Colonel Erasmus D. Keyes, Scott’s military secretary, acknowledged an increase in rumors of an actual organization to seize the capital and the public archives.38 Republican officials were not alone in recognizing the possibility; on January 25 a cannon salute to Kansas statehood so upset the ladies at the National Hotel that they packed their trunks.39 More important, Democrat Jeremiah S. Black, the brilliant, irascible and loyal Secretary of State expressed a widely held view in warning Buchanan that the possession of this city is absolutely essential to the ultimate design of the secessionists. They can establish a Southern Confederacy with the Capital of the Union in their hands, and without it, all the more important part of their scheme is bound to fail. If they can take it and do not take it they are fools. Knowing them as I do to be men of ability and practical good sense not likely to omit that which is necessary to for-

34 Charles Sumner to Francis W. Bird, January 9, 1861, quoted in Edward L. Pierce, Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner (Boston, 1877-93), IV, 5; T. Weed to A. Lincoln, January 10, 1861, R. T. Lincoln Collection; Lyman Trumbull to A. Lincoln, January 10, 1861, quoted in Horace White, The Life of Lyman Trumbull (Boston, 1913), 147.  
36 Springfield Republican, January 21, 1861.  
37 W. H. Seward to T. Weed, January 21, 1861, quoted in Frederick W. Seward, Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State (New York, 1891), 497; C. Sumner to J. A. Andrew, January 21, 1861, The Works of Charles Sumner (Boston, 1873), V, 457-458.  
38 Erasmus Darwin Keyes, Fifty Years’ Observation of Men and Events (New York, 1884), 358, 363.  
39 Mrs. Lyman Trumbull to Walter Trumbull, January 26, 1861, quoted in White, The Life of Lyman Trumbull, 122.
ward the ends which they are aiming at, I take it for granted that they have their eye fixed upon Washington. To prove their desire to take it requires no evidence at all beyond the intrinsic probability of the fact itself. The affirmative presumption is so strong that he who denies it is bound to establish the negative.

The circumstantial evidence of an attack, Black claimed, was "overwhelming and irresistible." Within the month Buchanan's Secretary of War Joseph Holt agreed with Black on the basis of still more evidence.⁴⁰

Stanton, in view of Scott's new information and Black's state of mind, became excited about the imminent plot and again spread the word of its existence. When Sumner called at Stanton's office on January 25 the Attorney General scurried from room to room seeking privacy from pro-southern clerks in order to tell Sumner of the widespread secession conspiracy; and on that or the next evening Stanton visited Sumner at the Senator's lodgings to inform him of a southern plan to possess the capital and the national archives. "It is feared," Sumner wrote Andrew, "that the departments will be seized and occupied as forts. What then can be done by the General's [Scott's] dragoons and flying artillery."⁴¹ In late January Stanton also informed Seward about the new crisis, and it was then that Seward wrote the new resolution instructing the "committee of five" to investigate secret organizations hostile to the government in the District of Columbia.⁴² According to Calusha Crow, Republican leaders

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⁴⁰ J. S. Black to J. Buchanan, January 22, 1861 [copy], Jeremiah S. Black Papers; Executive Document No. 20, 37 Cong., 1 Sess.
⁴² W. H. Seward to H. Wilson, June 6, 1870, quoted in Wilson, "Jeremiah S. Black and Edwin M. Stanton," 465; Seward, Seward at Washington ..., 492. Stanton apparently conferred openly with Representative J. M. Ashley, J. M. Ashley, Reminiscences of the Great Rebellion, Calhoun, Seward, and Lincoln [address of June 2, 1890], (New York, 1890), 22-23. Ironically, only a few days later, on January 30, Elihu B. Washburne wrote Lincoln that no organization "NOW" existed to prevent the counting of electoral votes or Lincoln's inauguration. Washburne to Lincoln, R. T. Lincoln Collection.
hoped by the resolution to convince any plotters that their movements were well known.43

Although the new House instructions to the committee specifically concerned the District of Columbia, reports and rumors had also implicated military groups in Maryland and the committee directed its attention to that problem as well.44 Virginia also warranted immediate scrutiny; Dawes informed Secretary Holt that Virginia had sent an agent to the national armory in Springfield, Massachusetts, to urge the hurried completion of a new model musket ordered by ex-Secretary Floyd the previous summer, and although Virginia agreed to pay the expense, it was also to receive a large amount of machinery to manufacture these arms of superior quality.45 Such information only confirmed the Republican policy of not alienating the border states.46

Committee questions directed to the situation in Maryland yielded little information of value. Democratic Representative John B. Clark of Missouri, a future Confederate senator, frankly admitted that he had held “speculative discussions” about the effect of secession on the District, but he insisted that all talk of preventing Lincoln’s inauguration was denounced.47 One witness testified to a rumor that elements in Baltimore stood ready to attack the capital and prevent the inauguration, while a second estimated the size of the secession group in Baltimore at 6,000 men. Others claimed that if armed troops accompanied

45 E. S. [Albion?] to George Ashmun, January 11, 1861; W. S. George to H. L. Dawes, January 28, 1861, Joseph Holt Papers, Library of Congress.
Lincoln to Washington, a group known as the "Constitutional Guards" would prevent their passage through the city of Baltimore.\textsuperscript{48} Even with this testimony, however, the committee could establish very little about an actual plot conceived in Maryland. Physical evidence was needed. It did not exist.

As for the danger from groups in Washington itself, the "committee of five" received conflicting testimony. The mayor of Washington, James G. Berret, who thought it unnecessary to add even one man to the police force, ignored the committee's evidence and found southern threats ill-considered.\textsuperscript{49} The mayor's testimony did little more than make him suspect: he explained away recently organized military organizations, notably the pro-southern "National Volunteers," as existing for self-protection, and he considered any military force led by Henry A. Wise merely a response to the anticipated invasion from the North at the time of Lincoln's inauguration. Others, including the senior officer of the National Volunteers, agreed with Berret's testimony, and repeatedly revealed the degree of southern sympathy in the District.\textsuperscript{50} Most important, Jacob Thompson, former Secretary of the Interior, told the committee that soon after Lincoln's election "various persons" spoke of preventing his inauguration by force. But Thompson swore that since the southern states had begun to secede, such plans had been given up.\textsuperscript{51} Finally, for all his previous fears of secession, Maryland Governor Thomas J. Hicks practically endorsed Thompson's view.\textsuperscript{52} The committee was left with no substantial evidence. It could not point to any secret plot.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 150, 146, 31, 138.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 3, 6; E. B. Washburne to A. Lincoln, R. T. Lincoln Collection.
\textsuperscript{50} House Report No. 79, 9-10, 15-27, 93, 108. "Several hundred" National Volunteers met on January 10 and resolved that they would "act in the event of withdrawal of Maryland and Virginia," yet they denounced as "ridiculous and mischievous" the rumor that Lincoln's inauguration might be interfered with. Later meetings followed. Washington Constitution, January 11, 16, 30, 1861.
\textsuperscript{51} House Report No. 79, 87; Springfield Republican, February 5, 1861. Thompson may have been telling the truth, but if a plot did exist it would have been to his advantage to say precisely the same thing.
\textsuperscript{52} House Report No. 79, 166-167, 169, 172, 177. Hicks had earlier rejected an invitation from Governor Gist of South Carolina to send deputies to a southern convention to consider measures for "concerted action." Radcliffe, Governor Thomas H. Hicks of Maryland and the Civil War, 16. For a partial synopsis of the testimony before the "committee of five," see Horatio King, Turning on the Light (Philadelphia, 1895), 91-94.
Lack of evidence put the committee at the mercy of General Scott's testimony. At the age of seventy-seven the corpulent, asthmatic veteran could barely negotiate the stairs to the committee room. When he reached it so out of breath as to require an extended rest, he could merely repeat the rumors the committee desperately sought to confirm. Scott testified that, while he had no direct personal knowledge on the subject of a conspiracy, he had received startling information in "innumerable letters from, probably, thirteen to sixteen states, three and four, and up to seven a day." Yet he admitted that except for a "few verbal assurances" these letters had been the only basis for his ordering of eight companies to Washington. Still, believing in the conspiracy, Scott swore that he would protect the capital. Depending on his mood, he vowed that conspirators would have the choice when caught of being blown to "hell" or being lashed to a twelve pounder and ending their days on the hills of Arlington as manure.

After several tense days the count of electoral votes on February 13, 1861, which Lincoln and others had expected to be a major crisis, passed without incident. With 100 armed police from New York and Philadelphia packed in the galleries alone, only angry southern taunts to Scott upset the proceedings—"free state pimp" rang in Scott's ears as his reward for guarding the ceremonies. The day after the electoral count Dawes reluctantly added his approval to a unanimous committee report, concluding that the treason plot hinged on the secession of either Maryland or Virginia, or both, but that at the moment no "satisfactory evidence" of secret organizations existed.

After Howard presented the committee's findings, however,
Branch abruptly submitted a minority report calling for withdrawal of military forces from the District of Columbia. Amid tumult on the floor, Dawes then rose and solemnly revealed that the unanimous committee report was really a "Scotch verdict" hammered out in committee despite personal positions. The report did not include ex-secretary Jacob Thompson's testimony that the danger of a plot had existed at one time. Expressing his personal fears, Dawes ominously argued that the conspiracy did not then exist precisely because the troops in Washington had rendered it inexpedient. His revelation of a prior conspiracy threw the House into an uproar which, according to one political reporter, exceeded anything of its kind in Congress. The House, consequently, laid Branch's minority report on the table and, rather than the militia leaving Washington, the small force of 653 men remained in the city to insure the successful inauguration of Lincoln.

Yet the South had little to fear from these troops because, again, Republicans refused to take what in other circumstances would have been legitimate action against treason. Believing that the fate of Washington and the nation depended on the decisions of Maryland and Virginia, Republicans continued their policy of non-coercion. They continued it, Dawes revealed, because "we listened to the voice of the men of the border states, who importuned us time and again to forbear any legislation that would exasperate their people. . . . Bills," he continued, "were introduced to authorize the President to institute coercive measures, and gentlemen of high standing and influence in the border states came to us with tears in their eyes, begging us to forbear." The advice of border state loyalists dominated Republican councils. In turn, the Republican policy of non-coercion was responsible for the cool reception given to resolutions of the "committee of five."

Indeed, a series of hard-line bills failed because of Republican moderation. In mid-January, for instance the House voted down

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58 Ibid., 914. Joseph Holt, Buchanan's Secretary of War, agreed with Dawes. Asked by Buchanan to determine if the troops in Washington were necessary, Holt confirmed the southern revolutionary plan of occupying the capital by arms, and he concluded that the presence of protective militia caused the abandonment of that plan. Executive Document No. 20, 37 Cong., 1 Sess.
60 Congressional Globe, 37 Cong., 2 Sess. (May 23, 1861), Appendix, 172.
Dawes’s resolution to direct the President to “regain and defend the possession of forts, arsenals, and other property of the United States.” A bill reported by Reynolds for the “committee of five,” which also would have authorized the President to call the militia to recover confiscated property, was withdrawn by Reynolds himself, recommitted to the committee, and never heard of again. (A comparable fate befell the Committee on Military Affairs bill which duplicated the Reynolds bill except that it did not call for the recovery of forts.) Even import duties in the South remained in southern hands because, as with a bill from the Judiciary Committee, the House refused to pass the “committee of five” resolution providing for their collection. As Buchanan charged, Congress did refuse to grant him the authority and force to suppress insurrection. The House simply refused approval of “committee of five” resolutions when they conflicted with the policy of inactivity.

By late February the committee too fell into the soft line. In its last two reports, having castigated Buchanan for his negotiations with the South Carolina commissioners, it quietly resigned itself to the accomplished southern seizure of forts and arsenals. And, following Buchanan’s policy, Congress, with no objections from the committee, adjourned without making any unusual appropriations for the navy and without ordering the recall of vessels from distant stations. The conversion was complete. By the time of Lincoln’s inauguration in early March, Republicans—and the “committee of five” in particular—deferred, in both rhetoric and action, to Union more completely than mere party interests.

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61 Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess. (January 18, 1861), 463.
63 The committee's journal (House Report No. 91, 36 Cong., 2 Sess.) does not indicate that anyone appeared before the committee on this subject, though someone may have. Also, Dawes in his account says that the committee was instrumental in forcing John B. Floyd to leave the cabinet, but the committee of five was formed after Floyd left, not before.