

A History of Notable Senate Investigations **prepared by the United States Senate Historical Office**

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Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce *(The Kefauver Committee)*

Resolution passed: May 2, 1950

Chairman: C. Estes Kefauver, 1950-1951; Herbert O'Conor, 1951

Committee members:

Lester Hunt (D-WY)

Herbert O'Conor (D-MD)

Charles Tobey (R-NH)

Alexander Wiley (R-WI)

Origins

In 1949 the American Municipal Association, representing more than 10,000 cities nationwide, petitioned the federal government to combat the growing influence of organized crime. First-term senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee drafted a resolution to create a special committee to investigate the issue. The Commerce and Judiciary committees battled to control the investigation and, following a protracted debate, Vice President Alben Barkley cast the tie-breaking vote to establish a special committee.¹

Process

Senate Resolution 202 provided the Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, commonly known as the Kefauver committee, with \$150,000 to study interstate crime. When the five member committee was set to expire at the end of February 1951, the public inundated Congress with letters demanding that the inquiry continue. The Senate responded, extending support for the investigation to September 1, 1951. During the course of a 15-month investigation, the committee met in 14 major U.S. cities and interviewed hundreds of witnesses in open and executive session.

Public Relations

Though not the first congressional committee to televise its proceedings, the Kefauver committee hearings became the most widely-viewed congressional investigation to date. An estimated 30 million Americans tuned in to watch the live proceedings in March 1951. The television broadcasts educated a broad audience about the complicated issues of interstate crime. "Television and radio make these events more vivid and alive to the general public than newspapers," explained one New York teacher. "I do not think any of you can possibly realize how much good it has done to have these hearings televised," wrote Mrs. Carl Johnson. "It has made millions of us aware of conditions that we would never have fully realized even if we had read the newspaper accounts."²

The broadcasts made the Kefauver committee a household name; in March 1951, 72 percent of Americans were familiar with the Kefauver committee's work. Schools dismissed

students to watch the hearings. Housewives neglected housework. Blood banks ran low on donations, prompting one Brooklyn Center to install a television and tune in to the hearings and donations shot up 100 percent. “Never before had the attention of the nation been riveted so completely on a single matter,” explained *Life* magazine. “The Senate investigation into interstate crime,” it concluded, “was almost the sole subject of national conversation.”³

In December 1951 Americans selected Chairman Kefauver as one of 10 most admired men, joining a list of notables including Pope Pius XII, Albert Einstein, and Douglas MacArthur.⁴ Kefauver sought the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 1952 and 1956. Though he was unsuccessful in his bid for the presidency, in 1956 Governor Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee, selected Kefauver as his vice presidential running mate. The Stevenson-Kefauver ticket lost the election to incumbents Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon.

Investigation

Building upon the earlier work of state crime commissions, Kefauver directed committee staff to examine what he called “the life blood of organized crime”: interstate gambling. Investigating gambling, according to one scholar, “meant that Kefauver and his colleagues first focused on urban areas, the strongholds of both gangsters and Democrats.” Despite the potential political cost to his party, Kefauver pledged to lead a “no stones unturned, no holds barred, right down the middle of the road, let the chips fall where they may” inquiry.⁵

The committee launched its investigation in Miami on May 28, 1950, and found evidence of gambling everywhere, from restaurants to cigar stands. The committee traced one bookmaking syndicate’s political connections all the way to Florida governor Fuller Warren, a Democrat. Warren accused Kefauver of being an “ambition-crazed Caesar who is trying desperately and futilely” to be a presidential candidate. The committee’s summary, which implicated the governor in illicit gambling activities, proved to be Warren’s political downfall.⁶

In Kansas City, the committee confronted, in Kefauver’s words, a “place that was struggling out from under the rule of the law of the jungle.” In Chicago, the committee heard testimony from gangsters who confessed to using legitimate business interests to curry favor with local law enforcement. Revelations of bribery and illegal gambling among the city’s police force drew intense scrutiny from the mayor leading one journalist to report that “one-fifth of the city’s police captains were said to be slated for the skids.”⁷ The Chicago investigation connected top officials—most of whom were members of the Democratic Party—with corrupt practices. Many Illinois Democrats lost their reelection bids in that year’s midterm election, including Senate Majority Leader Scott Lucas. During his final months in office, a bitter Lucas tried unsuccessfully to prematurely end the committee’s investigation.⁸

Public interest in the Kefauver inquiry peaked in March 1951 when the committee convened hearings in New York City and millions of Americans watched the live broadcast. The televised hearings became, in the words of Senator Kefauver, “a national crusade, a great debating forum, an arouser of public opinion on the state of the nation’s morals.” Viewers watched incredulously as a cadre of individuals representing the underworld of interstate bookmaking and gambling interests offered details of their sordid business arrangements. Criminals “as suave and well-mannered as their investigators,” observed one journalist, “were treated with the courtesy customarily reserved for law-abiding citizens.”⁹ Kefauver’s studied and balanced approach to his witnesses earned him the respect of many Americans.

Television viewers were riveted, in part, by the cast of characters called to testify before the committee. Particularly dramatic was testimony by Frank Costello. Crime commissions across the nation had identified Costello as a key figure in the nation's largest gambling syndicates. Testifying before the committee in New York, Costello, with his well-coifed hair and tailored suits, came to personify the American gangster in public imagination. When his legal counsel objected to the television cameras, cameramen instead directed their devices at Costello's hands. During an intense period of questioning by Rudolph Halley, Costello's hands "twisted and clenched," according to one account, "revealing [his] inner fears and confusion." Costello mumbled incoherent answers, became belligerent, refused to answer questions, and twice left the witness table without being dismissed. Americans were fascinated by the spectacle of a mob boss under duress. The committee later cited him for contempt and he served jail time.¹⁰

In addition to Costello, the committee interrogated a veritable who's who of the criminal underworld. Virginia Hill, former girlfriend of criminal mastermind Bugsy Siegel, testified to having had no knowledge of criminal activities while in the company of notorious mobsters. Antagonized by the press, Hill kicked and slapped aggressive journalists on her way out of the hearing room, actions caught on live television. Former New York City mayor William O'Dwyer testified to allegations of corruption during his tenure. Then serving as ambassador to Mexico, O'Dwyer's answers lacked specificity, leading the public to conclude that he was being intentionally evasive. The committee initiated perjury action against him. His reputation shattered, O'Dwyer resigned his diplomatic post.¹¹

Outcome

The committee's legislative achievements were modest, at best. Kefauver favored the creation of a Federal Crime Commission, which the FBI and Department of Justice ardently opposed. The committee's second chairman, Herbert O'Connor (who took over after an exhausted Kefauver stepped down as chairman), sponsored legislation aimed at controlling illegal drugs by expanding appropriations for the Narcotics Bureau, the committee's sole legislative accomplishment.¹²

More important were the non-legislative results of the investigation. By bringing public opinion to bear on the problems of interstate crime the investigation helped local and state law enforcement and elected officials to aggressively pursue criminal syndicates. The hearings clearly demonstrated that some elected officials had facilitated and profited from criminal activities. These dramatic hearings also made certain that television would play a large role in future Senate investigations.

¹ Harold Hinton, "Senate Fight Seen over Crime Hunt," *New York Times*, 13 Apr 1950, 21.

² Miss Mildred E. Bodin of the Schroon Lake Central School in New York to Senator Kefauver, 9 Apr 1951, and Mrs. Carl E. Johnson to Honorable Estes Kefauver (no address), 23 Mar 1951; Complaints, General and Anonymous; Box 52; CR15; Records of the Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, General Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives building, Washington, DC.

³ Gorman, Joseph, *Kefauver: A Political Biography*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, 92.

⁴ Gallup, George, ed., *The Gallup Poll: volume 2, 1949-1958*, Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 979-80, 1038.

⁵ Theodore Wilson, "The Kefauver Committee on Organized Crime," in Roger Bruns, David Hostetter, and Raymond Smock, eds., *Congress Investigates: A Critical and Documentary History, Revised Edition*, New York: Facts on File, 2011, 728; Chalmers Roberts, "Senate Unit Agreed Upon to Dig Deep into Rackets," *The Washington Post*, 12 Apr 1950, 1.

⁶ Gorman, *Kefauver*, 80-81; Wilson, "The Kefauver Committee on Organized Crime," 730.

⁷ Kefauver, *Crime in America*, 141-142; James Doherty, "Kefauver Quiz Keeps Police Here in Stew," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 Dec 1950, 6.

⁸ William Moore, *The Kefauver Committee and the Politics of Crime, 1950-1952*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press), 158-159; Wilson, "The Kefauver Committee on Organized Crime," 731.

⁹ Kefauver, *Crime in America*, 283; Emanuel Perlmutter, "Everyone Polite at Crime Hearing," *New York Times*, 13 Mar 1951, 27.

¹⁰ Wilson, "The Kefauver Committee on Organized Crime," 733-734; "Costello Gets 18 Months and Fine of \$5000," *Washington Post*, 9 Apr 1952, 11.

¹¹ Moore, *The Kefauver Committee and the Politics of Crime*, 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, 215.