Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program –
the Truman 1941 Committee – The Camp Blanding Case

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The U.S. Army has managed significant funding cycles throughout its history. When funding declines, the Army is forced to curtail troop levels, restrict weapons and equipment development and procurement, and close facilities. This was the Army’s operating environment during the 1920s and 1930s.

Historically, however, funding contractions have ended with either the threat of war or the actual outbreak of hostilities. Such was the case in the late 1930s. Beginning with small fund increases in 1939, funding for the War Department accelerated dramatically during 1940 and 1941 as the Army prepared for what would become World War II. Although the eventual size of the Army was being debated, it was very clear substantial increases in training facilities would be needed. The posts available for training a much enlarged Army were not available in 1940 – they would have to be built, and built rapidly.

A consequence of sharply increased spending under accelerated time schedules can be both wasteful spending and over spending. Such action often draws Congressional investigations and this is exactly what happened starting in 1941.

This paper explores the activities of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, otherwise known as the “Truman Committee.” The scope of the Committee’s investigation was very broad, and covered both U.S. Army and Navy expenditures. This paper, however, is more narrowly focused, specifically examining the Committee’s investigation of the mobilization and conversion of Camp Blanding. Following a brief review of the development of Camp Blanding, this paper will describe the Truman Committee’s investigation of the construction work at Camp Blanding. This will provide a case example of a Congressional investigation into
accelerated defense spending. The description of the Truman Committee’s work at Camp Blanding ended with some surprise results, which will be described in this paper.

The Truman Committee’s activities have links to current and emerging proposed funding increases in the Department of Defense. After declines in funding during the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration is proposing significant increases in defense spending. This paper concludes by connecting the lessons evident from the Truman Committee investigation of Camp Blanding to the current funding increases.

_Camp Blanding: A Brief History_

Beginning in 1909, the Florida National Guard (FLNG) operated a relatively small training site at Black Point on the St. John’s River, five miles south of Jacksonville, Florida. The FLNG site contained about 300 acres. The War Department owned an adjacent site of about 680 acres\(^1\) where ranges were located.

The Black Point site was mobilized for federal service during World War I and named Camp Joseph E. Johnston (for Confederate general Joseph Eggleston Johnston). The site grew to a complex of 600 buildings and was a primary training site for quartermaster troops.\(^2\) In 1928, the Camp Johnston site was again occupied by the FLNG and named Camp J. Clifford R. Foster in honor of General Joseph Clifford Reed Foster, Adjutant General of the FLNG from 1901 to 1917 and 1923 to 1928.\(^3\)

In 1938, recognizing the escalation of war tensions, the U.S. Navy began to examine the need for naval aircraft and suitable bases for training and maintenance. The Hepburn Board prepared a

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\(^3\) Hawk, op. cit., p. 125.
report detailing needs, and among other needs, recommended a major Naval Air Station be established near Jacksonville, Florida. On 13 June 1939, Congress passed the Naval Reserve Act, authorizing substantial increases in Navy pilots, aircraft and air stations, including funding for the proposed Naval Air Station Jacksonville. A search for a suitable site in the Jacksonville area was already underway. The Camp Foster site was immediately attractive to the Navy, and discussion began on acquisition of the Camp and the adjacent War Department site.

Citizens in Jacksonville were most anxious to have the Navy build an air station in their locale, and officials in the city agreed to provide the necessary land at no cost to the Navy. The Florida legislature enacted legislation that created the Duval County Air Base Authority, and empowered it to issue bonds and levy taxes to purchase land for the Navy. The citizens in Duval County voted overwhelmingly to a tax levy for land purchase, and the bond sale netted $1,100,000.

FLNG then began a search for a new training site. Six potential sites were considered, and a site in Clay County was selected. The new site was to contain 28,200 acres. The FLNG received $400,000 from the sale of the Camp Foster site, and was required to use these funds to purchase the new training site and complete preliminary site development.

The new Post’s General Order Number 1 named the Post Camp Blanding, in honor of native Floridian Major General Albert H. Blanding, who had commanded the 53rd Brigade, 27th, Infantry

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8 Letter, Brigadier General Vivian Collins to Lieutenant Colonel Arthur R. Wilson, War Department, 16 May 1941, Adjutant General’s File on Camp Blanding, Camp Blanding Museum.
10 Ibid, p. 17.
Division in World War I. Gen. Blanding later commanded the 31st Infantry Division and served as the Chief of the National Guard Bureau.\textsuperscript{11}

Site utility construction began almost immediately, and buildings from the Camp Foster site were relocated to the new Post.\textsuperscript{12} The Post cantonment area was designed to accommodate two infantry regiments, with buildings for headquarters, mess halls and latrines facing a central parade ground. Construction was also started on residences for permanent site personnel and an officers’ club.

In late 1939, construction of the National Guard facilities was forecast to take two years,\textsuperscript{13} but, recognizing that National Guard units would be mobilized for federal service, the pace of the effort was rushed beginning in mid-1940.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Army Mobilization}

War Department planning up to the onset of World War II was based on two assumptions:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Forces would be mobilized only as the U.S. entered a new war.
  \item Shortly after mobilization, Army units would move quickly to the combat theaters.
\end{itemize}

These assumptions were based on Army experience in the “Great War” (World War I). As a consequence of the planning assumptions, there would be no need for a large number of training facilities in the U.S. Testifying before Congress, General George Marshall noted:

“The Protective Mobilization Plan was developed under the assumption that upon mobilization, troops would have to move as soon as possible to a theater of operations, following the precedent of 1917, of all prior wars in which this country had engaged, and the custom of war in general. The

\textsuperscript{11} Hawk, op. cit., p. 135.
\textsuperscript{12} Bradford County Telegraph, 15 November 1939, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{13} Bradford County Telegraph, 15 November 1939, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{14} Bradford County Telegraph, 7 June 1940, p. 1.
plans, therefore, contemplated only essential installations and facilities in the continental United States and left to future determination the installations which would be required in the theater of operations, wherever that might be. Only emergency short-term installations and facilities were planned for the zone of the interior.

“Provision was not made for the contingency which now [1941] exists involving a full mobilization in time of peace, with a long and indefinite training period and a peacetime exactitude or solicitude for the physical and recreational accommodations – all involving more expensive structures and more elaborate arrangements.”

On 1 July 1939, the strength of the Regular Army active force was 189,867 (174,000 enlisted), Reserves of 110,000, and National Guard forces of 200,000. In early September 1939, President Roosevelt authorized an increase in strength of the Regular Army to 227,000 and National Guard forces to 235,000.

With the German invasion of the Netherlands, Belgium and France in 1940, the President ordered a partial mobilization in May-June 1940. Regular Army size was increased to 375,000. Congress approved induction of the National Guard, and this started mid-September 1940. Congress also approved the Selective Service and Training act, but no significant inductions were to occur before January 1941. The objective of these actions was to create a 1,000,000 man Army by 1 January 1941, and a 1,400,000 man Army by 1 July 1941.

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17 Ibid, section II-3.
18 Ibid, sections II-3 through II-5.
The question was where to train all these men.¹⁹ Men inducted through the Selective Service system, as well as men recruited to fill out National Guard units would require basic training. In addition, while it seemed evident that the Army would eventually be fighting, it was not at all clear when that fighting would commence. Thus, until units were deployed to a combat theater, training sites would be needed for longer periods than forecast from World War I experience.

During fiscal 1940-1941, some 45 new training areas were constructed for the Army, with more than half of them in new sites. In addition, 29 new Reception Centers and 21 new Replacement Training Centers were opened between the summer 1940 and December 1941. The Army’s construction expenditures for training sites alone were almost $2.6 Billion between 1940 and 1943.²⁰

**Mobilization of Camp Blanding**

The General Staff controlled site selection for training camps.²¹ In late spring 1940, General Marshall decided to establish divisional camps and cantonments and a network of training centers. Troops were to be trained in all nine U.S. corps areas, with divisions located so they could readily form corps and armies. Gen. Marshall dictated that time and money would be saved if existing posts were expanded, and new training facilities would be built on land currently owned by the federal government or a state.

The Protective Mobilization Plan had a list of sites where the National Guard divisions could be sent for training. Some divisions were assigned to posts like Fort Benning, but these sites were inadequate for even the full regular divisions. Consequently, planners assigned the National Guard

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¹⁹ Eventually the Army grew well beyond 1,400,000 and training needs continued throughout the War.
²⁰ Conn, op. cit., sections V-1 through V-4.
divisions to smaller forts and summer training camps owned by various states.\textsuperscript{22} Planners had believed the divisions would be in these smaller posts for only 30 to 60 days before deployment to a combat theater: consequently, the lack of adequate facilities was only a temporary inconvenience.

Camp Blanding was on the Protective Mobilization Plan list of training sites for National Guard units, but planners did not know the state of infrastructure development at the site. It was feared the site was wooded and probably swampy. Indeed, very little was known about the state of any of the other proposed sites. Detailed site reviews would help, but there was little time and no money for thorough site investigation. Brigadier General (later Major General) Richard C. Moore, War Department G4, gave the job of investigating the various sites to corps area commanders. The surveys were completed, but very little consideration was given to engineering issues associated with building large training sites. Some sites were rejected, but Camp Blanding remained on the list of potential training sites.

Delegating site selection reviews to corps commanders opened the door for political maneuvering, and the final selection of Camp Blanding involved considerable politicking. In 1939, Brigadier General Vivian B. Collins, Adjutant General of Florida, had a significant role in selecting the site for Camp Blanding. Gen. Collins was a friend of Lieutenant General D. Embick, commander of the Fourth Corps; Camp Blanding was promoted as an ideal site for a divisional training site. Although the site was heavily wooded and indeed swampy, Gen. Embick assured Gen. Moore that Camp Blanding would make an excellent post. Gen. Moore visited Camp Blanding with Gen. Embick, and the site remained on the training site expansion list.

\textsuperscript{22} Fine, Lenore and Jesse A. Remington, op. cit., p. 139.
Congress was slow in authorizing funds needed for post construction. The first National Guard units were to be called into federal service on 16 September 1940. Because construction funding was delayed, the first facilities for newly mobilized National Guard units would not be ready until 1 November 1940, some six weeks after mobilization.\textsuperscript{23} Funding compromises involved taking loans from the President’s emergency funds. In the short term, this allowed construction to begin in many posts.

The Quartermaster Construction Division began selecting contractors and negotiating contracts for eight critical projects, with the Camp Blanding facilities among them.\textsuperscript{24} On 9 September 1940, President Roosevelt signed a supplemental defense appropriation bill which authorized $5.4 billion for the War and Navy Departments. Included in this funding was approximately $128 million for construction in the National Guard camps.\textsuperscript{25} There were still inadequate funds, and a third supplemental defense bill was under consideration. The third defense bill included $8.75 million for training areas, based on an allowance of $450 per trainee for cantonments and $320 per trainee for tent camps.\textsuperscript{26} Camp Blanding, as were many of the southern camps, was a tent camp.

The first challenge for the Camp Blanding project was to find a qualified contractor. The Construction Advisory Board, a group of highly experienced civilians with deep knowledge of construction contractors, proposed Starrett Brothers and Eken of New York, Bates and Rogers of Chicago, and the Foundation Company of New York. In many areas in the south, the Quartermaster Construction Division felt there were no qualified suppliers. Only one southern

\textsuperscript{23} For a complete discussion of the challenges of funding and construction delays, see Fine and Remington, op. cit., pp. 143-151.
\textsuperscript{24} Fine and Remington, op. cit., p. 149.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 149.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 150.
construction firm was considered, the J. W. Jones Corporation of Charlotte. However, J.W. Jones was committed to construction of Camp Shelby and eliminated from consideration.27

Starrett Brothers and Eken was chosen for the Camp Blanding project. This firm had established its ability to manage large projects on tight timetables in its construction of the Empire State Building. Starrett Brothers and Eken completed the project three months ahead of schedule and some $18 million under budget.28

Starrett Brothers and Eken had been highly recommended by the Construction Advisory Committee. In commenting on the selection of Starrett Brothers and Eken for the Camp Blanding project, Advisory Committee member Forrest S. Harvey, noted:

$10,000,000 to be done in three months looked like a whale of a job, and we were scared to death to put anybody on it but pretty big contractors.”29

On 9 September 1940, Starrett Brothers and Eken was awarded a contract for the initial federal construction at Camp Blanding with an estimated construction cost of $8,796,290 (excluding a contract for architectural work of $48,766.00 awarded to Solomon & Keis, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida). Starrett Brothers and Eken was to receive a fixed fee for the contract of $268,290.30 The contract was to provide Post infrastructure and facilities to quarter one “square” (four infantry regiments) infantry division. Construction was to provide enlisted and officers’ mess halls, administrative buildings, motor repair shops, warehouses, recreation and infirmary buildings, fire stations, theater tents, and enlisted men and officer tent frames. Infrastructure construction was to include railroad

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29 Harvey, Forrest S., testimony before the U.S. Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program (Truman Committee), 25 April 1941, *Truman Committee Hearings*, Part 1, p. 335, quoted in Fine and Remington, op. cit., p. 190.
30 Federal Register, Friday, 22 March 1941, pp. 1549-1550.
tracks, water and sewer service, a water treatment plant, telephone facilities, a 1,600 bed hospital, steam heating plant, rifle ranges, ammunition magazines, and almost 30 miles of paved roads. A short time later, Starrett Brothers and Eken was awarded an additional contract for approximately $8,000,000 as Camp Blanding was expanded to house two “square” infantry divisions. The Post was now to have a capacity of 60,000 men.

Starrett Brothers and Eken brought upwards of 2,000 craft superintendents, foreman and experienced tradesmen onto the site. But there was a new problem: staffing to build the facilities in a very short time frame – some 23,000 men would ultimately be employed in the construction project. Finding adequately trained employees was an immense problem, and the problem was never entirely solved. The contractor developed a partial solution by having untrained men work alongside of trained tradesmen – an on-the-job training effort. Starrett Brothers and Eken also utilized “mass production techniques by preparing wall, ceiling and roof panels in their sawmill. These panels were then moved to a building site and erected. In the saw mill, the panels for a mess hall could be produced in 10 minutes, and erection of the mess hall was completed in 25 minutes.

By mid-October, the construction force at Camp Blanding numbered 4,712, and by early December, the labor force had reached 21,000. A labor camp was built to house and feed 2,000 men, and a barracks for 112 white collar workers installed. Construction moved to a three shift per day pace with shift changes a major event. Because on-Post housing for the labor force was much lower than the number of men in the construction crew, men lived in make-shift housing in a nearby

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31 Bradford County Telegraph, 13 September 1940, p. 1.
32 Congressional Record – Senate, 10 February 1941, p. 837.
33 Fine and Remington, op. cit., p. 234.
34 Bradford County Telegraph, 18 October 1940, p. 1.
35 Bradford County Telegraph, 22 November 1940, p. 1.
area and in the small town of Starke. After the Post’s railroad was completed, trains brought workers to the site from Jacksonville.

The rapid growth of the construction force precipitated a new problem. Starrett Brothers and Eken was a union (“closed shop”) employer, and the majority of employees who had come south with the firm were union members. Much of the south, including Florida, were “open shop,” non-union areas. Union members applied pressure to the new employees to join the unions, but many Floridians refused to join. Progress on the site was significantly slowed, so much so that by late October, construction was 25% slower than scheduled.37

Another significant problem impacting the pace of the Camp Blanding construction involved moving materials onto the site. Road access to the Post was over a few narrow roads. These roads were typically jammed before and after construction shift changes with vehicles carrying construction workers; this slowed delivery of materials to the job site.

To ease flow of materials onto the site, railroad construction became a priority. Management from Southern Railway’s subsidiary Georgia Southern & Florida Railway Company (GS&F) began plans to provide needed rail service. An entirely new rail line was required from Therssia, Florida to the Post boundary. Additional track was needed inside the Camp proper as well as a connection to the Seaboard rail lines in Starke, Florida. Seaboard had already provided a bid to provide the necessary rail lines, but estimated it would take several months to complete the work. GS&F had not provided a bid because a senior manager had recommended abandoning a branch line required for the service.38

In some behind the scenes maneuvering, several employees of GS&F arranged a meeting with Major Leander Larson, the quartermaster supervising the construction work at Camp Blanding. Maj. Larson told the GS&F people he needed the rail lines immediately, and a proposal was written on a Sunday afternoon. Maj. Larson accepted the proposal upon presentation.

The proposal envisioned using 60 pound rail instead of the more customary 100 pound rail. Because GS&F had an adequate supply of the 60 pound rail on hand, there was no delay in procuring 80 or 85 pound rail commonly used for high traffic and/or heavy loads. GS&F agreed to a maximum cost of $225,000, the amount authorized in the original construction specifications. GS&F agreed to complete the work in 32 days. GS&F was able to complete the work in 31 days and nearly $14,000 under budget. The completed rail line allowed Starrett Brothers & Eken to bring construction materials into the Post avoiding the crowded roads – providing significant transportation cost savings. This was particularly important in moving the large amount of backfill lime rock needed to shape the cantonment area; savings on shipping lime rock more than paid for the cost of constructing the railroad system.

Another challenge faced in the construction area concerned the swampy nature of the cantonment area. Construction crew complaints of poor topography at Camp Blanding were numerous. Later surveys revealed some parts of the Post were as much as 24 feet below the level of the adjacent Kingsley Lake, and significant fill was thus required. Large quantities of lime rock were shipped in to level the ground and provide adequate beds for the rail lines and roads.

Unusually heavy rains made construction at Camp Blanding very difficult. The site Quartermaster supervising construction told Starrett Brothers and Eken to give grading and drainage priority over

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39 100 pound rail was typically used for heavier freight loads and heavy traffic areas. 60 pound rail was typically used for lighter loads, and/or lighter traffic loads.
building construction. Thousands of tons of lime rock and sand were brought across the new rail system into the site to improve drainage.\(^{40}\) This negatively impacted the project schedule, and added to project cost. Although Camp Blanding was to be ready for one National Guard division by the end of October, the Post was not ready.\(^ {41}\) In early December, however, the 31\(^{st}\) Infantry Division began to move into Camp Blanding. The men faced a difficult start to their year of Federal service. Joe Starnes, an officer in the division noted:

“A regiment of 1,815 men was moved in with not a single kitchen, latrine, or bathhouse available. This occurred in December in a pouring rain and conditions were such that it was impossible to use the straddle latrine. Only the grace of Almighty God prevented an epidemic.”\(^ {42}\)

In spite of all the construction challenges, by mid-February 1941, the initial construction work was 85% complete. Layoffs of 13,000 construction workers began.\(^ {43}\) The construction project had provided 1,188 buildings, 10,529 tents, and two laundries.\(^ {44}\) Post infrastructure included 65 miles of water lines, 49 miles of sewer lines, 138 miles of electrical lines, 64 miles of highway and 25 miles of railroads.\(^ {45}\)

There was more newly authorized construction. The first phase of the additional construction, costing “several hundreds of thousand dollars” would provide a Post finance office and four new quartermaster buildings.\(^ {46}\) In early June, a second phase of additional construction was authorized, this time for $5.2 million. This additional work included $2.2 million for road and railroad improvements, $367,000 for roads to the artillery ranges, $967,000 for soil stabilization in the

\(^{40}\) Fine and Remington, op. cit., p. 233.
\(^{41}\) Fine and Remington, op. cit., p. 240.
\(^{43}\) Bradford County Telegraph, 14 February 1941, p. 1.
\(^{44}\) Bradford County Telegraph, 28 March 1941, p. 1.
\(^{45}\) Bradford County Telegraph, 28 March 1941, p. 2.
\(^{46}\) Bradford County Telegraph, 25 April 1941, p. 1.
cantonment area, $450,000 for chapels and organs, $875,000 for day rooms and $340,000 for other improvements.\textsuperscript{47} And a short time later, $1.5 million was authorized for a field house, ordnance warehouses, motor storage sheds, and other additions.\textsuperscript{48}

The additional construction would drive the cost of the Camp Blanding federal facilities to approximately $35 million. Much of the overrun on the original construction work was attributed to filling low lying areas in the cantonment area. For example, the original estimate of fill needed for the cantonment area roads was 191,000 tons of lime rock. Completion of the road required 645,000 tons of lime rock.\textsuperscript{49} Interestingly, although the cost of the project had increased significantly, the fee paid to Starrett Brothers and Eken remained unchanged.

But the construction challenges were far from forgotten. Contractor selection, union labor, rail lines and topography issues were all part of the Truman Committee investigation. Decisions made to speed construction added cost, all fertile ground for a Senate investigation.

\textit{The Truman Committee}

On 10 February 1941, the then obscure junior senator from Missouri took the U.S. Senate floor to deliver a speech. Harry S. Truman spoke about ongoing defense spending, noting the tendency to award contracts to large firms. As a former small business owner, Truman was concerned that contract awards not be made in a way that would “… make the big men bigger and let the little men go out of business or starve to death.”\textsuperscript{50} Truman was further concerned with the funds being spent in expanding the U.S. defense forces, and cited a number of examples of what he described as.

\textsuperscript{47} Bradford County Telegraph, 20 June 1941, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{48} Bradford County Telegraph, 18 July 1941, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{50} Congressional Record, 10 February 1941, pp. 830-831.
wasteful spending. The Camp Blanding project was among his examples. Commenting on the Camp Blanding project, Senator Truman noted:

“At Camp Blanding, Fla., Starrett Brothers and Eken, Inc., general contractors of New York City, were awarded a $9,000,000 project, and 8 days later, awarded an additional $8,000,000 project – a total of $17,463,777 in construction. This particular job was supposed to be completed January 15, 1941, but as of December 27, 1940, was but 48 percent completed. There has been much discussion on this particular project. Fischbach & Moore, electrical contractors, of New York City, received the contract for the electrical work. So, too, did a New York contracting firm, J. L. Murphy, for all the plumbing work on the project. No one knows why Starrett Bros. & Eken, of New York City, should have received the contract for this particular project.”

Senator Truman was in his second term in the Senate. A failed small business man, he had just won his second term in a tough campaign. He had been closely aligned with Missouri Democratic political boss Tom Pendergast. Pendergast had been convicted of income tax evasion; Truman had worked hard to convince Missouri voters he was incorruptible.

In early 1941, the U.S. was officially neutral, but with war raging in both Europe and Asia, defense preparations were well underway. President Roosevelt had requested, and Congress and authorized, $10.5 Billion for national defense programs. In his 10 February speech, Senator Truman proposed an “… investigation of the national defense program and the handling of contracts.”

Complaints about defense spending had flooded into Senator Truman’s office. On his own, he undertook a 10,000 mile journey in his battered Dodge, conducting his own one man investigation.

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51 Congressional Record – Senate, 10 February 1941, p. 837.
He was shocked by what he found. He found construction laborers standing around, not working. Construction materials exposed to weather and being destroyed.\footnote{52 Poole, Robert M., “When Everybody Loved Congress,” American History, October 2012, pp. 54-59.}

Senator Truman’s Senate Resolution 71 was approved unanimously on 1 March 1941. The Resolution created the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, and the committee became known as the “Truman Committee.” The Committee had seven members and Senator Truman served as the Committee’s first chairman. Because of the thorough work done by the Committee, the Senate extended the life of the Committee through 1945.\footnote{53 United States Senate Historical Office, “Special committee to Investigate the National Defense Program,” Washington, D. C., retrieved from www.senate.gov on 15 May 2017.} \footnote{54 Senator Truman left the Committee in 1944 when he was elected Vice President of the United States.}

During the evening of 24 March 1941, in a nationwide broadcast, Senator Truman described the scope of the Truman Committee. After noting that defense appropriations had been so low they had caused a serious decay in the U.S. military forces, Senator Truman noted that $16.5 billion had been authorized to rebuild defense forces. But, he reported “rumors are rife questioning the manner in which contracts and the immense purchases have been handled under these appropriations.” He proposed the Truman Committee would investigate these rumors, and he defined the scope of the Committee’s charge as:

“… to make a full and complete study and investigation of the operation of the program for procurement and construction of supplies, material, munitions, vehicles, aircraft, vessels, plants, camps and other articles and facilities in connection with national defense, including (1) the types and terms of contracts awarded on behalf of the United States; (2) the methods by which such contracts are awarded and contractors selected; (3) the utilization of the facilities of small business concerns, through subcontracts or otherwise; (4) the geographic distribution of contracts and
location of plants and facilities; (5) the effect of such programs with respect to labor and the
migration of labor; (6) the performance of contracts and the accountings required of contractors; (7)
benefits accruing to contractors with respect to amortization for the purposes of taxation or
otherwise; (8) practices of management or labor, and prices, fees and charges, which interfere with
such program or unduly increase the cost, and (9) other such matters as the committee deems
appropriate.”

The Camp Blanding Investigation

The Truman Committee conducted hearings in Jacksonville, Florida in May 1941. By that time
construction was nearly complete, and the cost of the Camp Blanding construction had grown to
approximately $27,740,000.56 And there was more to come: the initial authorization had not
included day rooms, chapels, movie theaters (beyond the tent movie theaters, which turned out to be
very poor theaters), nor a field house. As noted above, these additions drove the cost of the federal
capital facilities at Camp Blanding to nearly $35 million.57

The first issue Committee members wanted to understand was why a northern contractor was
chosen instead of a southern contractor. Mr. Harry W. Loving, chairman of the War Department
Contractor Board, testified that there were relatively few very large projects in the south, and thus
few contractors had gained the experience to take on a project the size of the Camp Blanding work.
Mr. Loving stated that the only southern firm judged capable of managing the Camp Blanding
project was the Charlotte, North Carolina firm J. A. Jones Construction Company. That firm was
not selected because they had already been awarded a large contract for construction at Camp

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55 Truman, Senator Harry S., Radio Address “The Scope of the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense
56 Bradford County Telegraph, 14 March 1941, p. 1.
57 Later construction additions would raise the cost to nearly $42 million. See Bradford County Telegraph, 2 August 1946, p.
1. This cost included $24 million in buildings with the rest of the cost in roads, railroads, and site utilities.
Shelby, Mississippi. Mr. Loving noted that Starrett Brothers and Eken had not lobbied for the work, but had been asked to meet with representatives of the Construction Quartermaster to discuss their capabilities. The contract was awarded when it was determined the firm had the resources to manage the Camp Blanding project.

Mr. H. L. Stellmann, Starrett Brothers and Eken’s construction manager, noted that Starrett Brothers and Eken received its first preliminary drawing of the Camp Facilities on 2 October 1940, weeks after the construction contract was let. He further noted that the initial estimate for sewers was $550,000 with $450,000 estimated for water lines; plans for sewer and water lines were continually revised as the site grew, and were not marked final until mid-February 1941. Starrett Brothers and Eken laid 48 miles of water line, but indicated the initial construction estimate did not specify how much water and sewer lines were needed.

Investigating reports of major parts of the troop quarters area being below the level of Kingsley Lake, the Committee wanted to know who had selected the quarters’ area. Mr. Stellmann indicated the Construction Quartermaster had selected the site. The elevation of the site led to significant drainage problems, and Starrett Brothers and Eken had to build a substantial drainage system. There was no allowance in the original construction estimate for this work, and authorization for

building the drainage system was not received until mid-December 1940. Drainage problems delayed construction progress and were overcome at significant cost.\textsuperscript{61}

Another issue the Committee explored was railroad construction. Although the construction was completed under budget, Committee members were concerned with the use of 60 pound rail instead of the more commonly used 80 or 85 pound rail. The Committee had heard from Major James E. Rundell, then Constructing Quartermaster at Camp Blanding, that 60 pound rail was inadequate.\textsuperscript{62} Mr. D. W. Brosnan, superintendent of the Georgia Southern & Florida Railway Company, and the driving force in building the rail lines into Camp Blanding, was called to testify before the Truman Committee. During the Jacksonville hearings, the following exchange developed:

SENATOR BREWSTER: Well, of course, the aspect which has troubled some of those who have looked this over is that you apparently unloaded quite a lot of 60 pound rail which was advantageously located and unused, on the government, although 60 pound rail isn’t a very popular commodity right now, and it is in connection with a job which I think your engineering experience would indicate is liable to involve some pretty heavy traffic.

Mr. D. W. BROSANAN: I agree that it did involve heavy traffic and I maintain that it has done the job. There hasn’t been a wheel on the ground [i.e., a derailment]. We have handled 19,000 carloads of freight over it, dwo divisions of soldiers and for a period of some thirty to forty days, they operated daily a passenger train over it. I think that is proof that it did the job.

BREWSTER: No, but the camp is set up on a five-year basis.


BROSNAN: That is true.

BREWSTER: And there is likely to be very heavy traffic there as time goes on.

BROSNAN: Not as heavy as it has been.

BREWSTER: No, but certainly comparable if we ever get the mechanized equipment for which we are preparing. That is going to involve using heavy stuff.

BROSNAN: We have handled something over 10,000 carloads of this lime rock, which is as heavy as six or eight pieces of the heaviest artillery at Camp Blanding. You couldn’t get enough of it [artillery] on a car to equal the weight of any of these 10,000 carloads of lime rock that we have hauled in there.

BREWSTER: I haven’t inspected the equipment carefully, but we haven’t begun to see the size of equipment that we are going to be handling. We are still living in terms pretty much of 1917. My son is working on a gun that was invented in 1897 right now, which is pretty antediluvian.

TRUMAN: A damned good gun, too Senator.

BROSNAN: I still say this, that this particular line is prepared to and can handle any traffic that can be brought to it over the railroads of the South. In other words, if that line won’t take it, you will have to build some more railroads to get it down to it.

BREWSTER: We are certainly happy to have you justify the deal. You heard Major Rundell’s testimony in which he indicated a desire for something heavier, didn’t you, this morning.

BROSNAN: Yes sir, I heard that.

BREWSTER: You disagree with him?
BROSNAN: Absolutely, for this reason, if I may be permitted to say so.

BREWSTER: Yes, it is a free country still.

BROSNAN: A railroad consists of a great deal more than rail. It starts from the roadbed. That is the foundation. The next thing is ballast; the nest is ties; and the rail is the last item. You have, with one exception, a good roadbed. There is some cinder ballast on the railroad; possibly it needs some additional ballast. The ties are the best that money can buy. They were put in up to standard. The rail is equal to any traffic that will be handled into Camp Blanding. It has done the job and will continue to do the job. I make that as an unqualified statement. Andy railroad needs some maintenance. All railroads wear out. That is the nature of the animal.

BREWSTER: Are you familiar with the specifications of the Association of American Railroads?

BROSNAN: Yes, sir.

BREWSTER: And what do they require?

BROSNAN: The Association of American Railroads, so far as I know, has no specifications dealing with weights of rail that will be used in any particular locality for any particular traffic.

TRUMAN: That is all. \(^{63}\)

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Not only was the railroad construction completed early and under budget, it drove cost savings during the construction. Major James R. Rundell, Construction Quartermaster, testified before the committee that the railroad allowed shipping lumber to the site at lower cost, saving $286,000.64

The Committee also took testimony on the cost of lumber used on the site, freight charges for moving materials on site, materials purchased for completing the work, and use of union vs. non-union labor. There were no major cost implications of these issues.

During the hearings, Committee members and their counsel visited Camp Blanding on the afternoon of 20 May 1941. Following that visit, Senator Truman commented that anyone with “common sense” could have located the cantonment area in a better place. Senators Truman and Brewster argued the selection of Starrett Brothers and Eken was a mistake; they believed a southern company who knew local labor and material conditions could have completed the project for lower costs. The Senators were also unhappy with the choice of Camp Blanding as a training site. They noted “terrible waste” caused by planning delays, project changes, drainage problems and management of multiple firms working on the project.65 Senator Brewster was especially critical of the fee paid to Starrett Brothers and Eken, stating the only thing the government got for the $268,290 fee was the presence of one of the firm’s vice presidents at Camp Blanding for six months.66 Interestingly, Senator Brewster did not note that the contractor’s fee had remained unchanged from the original $8.8 million dollar project.

The Truman Committee was not the only Congressional investigation at Camp Blanding. Representative Albert J. Engel comprised a one-man committee investigating numerous camps in

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the Eastern United States. He would arrive at a Post or Base unannounced, walk onto the site, observe the construction effort and take many photographs. He would then depart unannounced.  

In early April, Representative Engel delivered that 40% of the Camp Blanding site was below the level of Kingsley Lake. This necessitated removal of “… 2,000,000 cubic yards of black muck and replacing it with 650,000 cubic yards of sand.” Engel further noted that Brigadier General Brehon Sommervell had told a House committee that Camp Blanding site preparation cost $5,000,000 more than originally estimated.  

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**The Surprising Result**

Based on the $27,740,000 cost at the time of the Jacksonville hearings, Truman committee members argued the Camp Blanding project cost the government $20 million beyond the original contract cost. Committee members were intent on finding the cause of this large overrun.

Mr. L. B. McLeod, president of the L. B. McLeod Construction Company of Orlando, Florida, had joined with another Florida contractor in an attempt to secure the Camp Blanding construction contract. They were told the contract had been awarded to Starrett Brothers and Eken, and that no Florida contractor, or even a combination of Florida contractors, was large enough to handle the construction contract. Mr. McLeod’s firm subsequently supplied materials for road construction. He was called to testify before the Truman Committee, and in his testimony he said:

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“… if I had it to do today, I wouldn’t attempt to try to get the general contract, because I don’t think we were big enough, large enough. That is a tremendous proposition. To me, it is a miracle the way the thing went up, even under the stress and strain and pressure. We laid roads there with speed that I had never dreamed of. If they had told me that we had to lay 150 carloads of rock in 10 hours, I would have told them that they would have to get someone else because it couldn’t be done, because it was beyond the fondest dreams of anybody to lay over 9,000 tons of rock in 1 day.”

Camp Blanding construction was clearly the target of significant investigational effort. And yet, when presenting results of the Truman Committee’s work, the Camp Blanding project received surprisingly little attention.

Committee members wanted an explanation for why the costs were so far beyond the initial estimated cost. Mr. H. J. Stellmann, Construction Manager, testified that the initial estimate was much too low. Initially, Camp Blanding was to be built for training of one National Guard “square” division, and the Post was to have a capacity of 39,000. Standard estimates of construction costs at that time were $320 per man in tent camps, giving an estimated cost of $12,500,000. Clearly somehow the Construction Quartermaster had miscalculated. And that estimate did not consider later authorizations for construction of laundries, chapels, day rooms, theaters, and expansion of the Station Hospital to 2,800 beds.

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70 A square division had four infantry regiments. The Army was in the process of “triangularizing” infantry divisions – that is, reducing the division to three infantry regiments. However, in 1940, most National Guard divisions were still “square.”

Shortly after the initial construction contract was awarded to Starrett Brothers & Eken, Camp Blanding’s mission was changed from training one square division to training two square divisions. And there was talk of adding a third square division to the training mission, but this never materialized. The Post’s mission then grew to training two square divisions and one independent infantry regiment, for a capacity of 60,000 men. Assuming a cost of $320 per man, a capacity of 60,000 would require a $19,200,000 construction project. The cost of the Camp Blanding construction effort had grown significantly, but not out of proportion to its mission.

Mr. H. W. McKensie, who had been employed as a construction manager for Starrett Brothers and Eken, noted that the rapid increase in defense spending was a significant problem, not just at Camp Blanding but across the nation. He commented to the Truman Committee:

“The speed with which the defense program had to be inaugurated, with an unprepared [Quartermaster] organization throughout, led to this [learning about good construction work] we are all going through By that I mean that a construction quartermaster was given not only an eight-hundred-million-dollar program in June, but by the 18th of July had been $4,000,000,000 worth of work to get under way. This, of course, necessitated considerable organization and reorganization, calling from the ranks of the reserves personnel with which to carry out this work. I believe the procedure of calling for officer personnel rather than for construction personnel might have led to some of the inequitable placing of some men who were perhaps not so experienced in construction. … The amount of work that was of necessity undertaken by contractors throughout the country created a shortage of equipment unheard of in our experience.”

The Committee was also told that

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building a large project under a highly compressed time table resulted in significant cost increases: the rushed schedule destroyed construction efficiency.

Interestingly, after the departure of the Truman Committee members from Jacksonville, Florida, discussion of the cost increases quieted. It was clear Committee members understood the cost of Camp Blanding was the result of rushed construction and growth in the mission of the Post. Even the popular press got into the discussion: the 4 October 1941 issue of *Collier's Magazine* noted that Camp Blanding’s construction cost was just over $505 per trainee versus $1,200 per trainee at other sites. It was also pointed out that only six new camps were built for less cost per trainee than Camp Blanding, and these six camps were designed to train only one infantry division.\(^\text{73}\)

In the end, the Truman Committee was able to criticize the Camp Blanding work for only one problem. The Starrett Brothers and Eken contract prohibited hiring sub-contractors, and the contractor had hired sub-contractors for electrical and plumbing work.\(^\text{74}\)

**Conclusion**

Proposed increases in current Department of Defense budgets resemble the rapid increases in defense appropriations of 1939-1941. The current appropriation planning could again lead to charges of wasteful spending and invite Congressional investigations; there have already been suggestions such investigations are needed.\(^\text{75} \ 76\)

It is important to put the Camp Blanding project – and other similar projects of the time – in context. Beginning in late summer 1940, National Guard units were called to federal service for one

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\(^{74}\) “Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, Notable Senate Investigations, U.S. Senate Historical Office, Washington, D.C.


year. Training sites had to be prepared quickly so significant training could be completed before the National Guard units were released from federal service. The 31st Infantry Division was mobilized before facilities at Camp Blanding were complete and spent several weeks living in their various armories; the result was wasted training time. The need to build a significant number of training sites in a very short time resulted in higher costs at Camp Blanding and many other posts and bases in the build up to the U.S. participation in World War II.

Given the rushed construction schedule, the constantly increasing scope of work, and weather challenges, the Truman Committee’s judgment was that the Camp Blanding project was not such a terrible disaster, contrary to their initial views.

The War Department might have been able to deal with some of the Truman Committee’s challenges had it been more active in communicating its plans and the training needs imposed by expanding missions. With the significant increase in Camp Blanding’s construction costs, better public relations efforts were a clear necessity.

Senior Army command could use the study of the Camp Blanding construction case to explore how managing Congress and the general public might forestall criticism of “wasteful” spending. Explaining the necessity for large expenditures and the mechanisms for audit and control are clearly called for.

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77 Of course, by a narrow margin in the fall of 1941, Congress extended the National Guard mobilization.