

## GOVERNMENT BY INVESTIGATION: CONGRESS, PRESIDENTS, AND THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS, 1945–2012

---

**Paul C. Light**

Brookings Institution Press, 2014, 250 pp., £28.92 (pb), ISBN: 978-0-8157-2268-7

Paul Light is one of the most astute and hard-working students of American government. His works on the structure, reform and failures of the US federal government and on social entrepreneurship are invariably painstakingly researched. They take a longitudinal and/or comparative perspective and involve creative combinations of large-N datasets (whether of objects or studies) with case study narratives and insider knowledge.

His latest book, *Government by Investigation*, cements his reputation. It documents the 100 most significant investigations into the US federal government, and asks why some of them have had so much more impact than others. By impact he means the extent to which these investigations – which he likens to ‘oversight on steroids’: focused, sustained, systematic inquiries by bodies such as Congressional committees and blue-ribbon commissions which are undertaken in response to significant breakdowns in government performance – discernibly contribute to addressing the questions raised by the issue under study. Specifically, he examines whether and how investigations contribute to what he calls: (1) reforming broken bureaucracies, (2) repairing failed policies, (3) reversing course on national strategies, (4) enhancing accountability, (5) setting the agenda for future action, and (6) resolving doubts about a particular event.

Light’s carefully (though in part subjectively) selected case inventory covers the period between 1945 and 2012. It contains both high-profile (but as the analysis suggests, not necessarily high-impact) investigations of Pearl Harbor, Communists in government, Watergate, Clinton impeachment, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and nearly forgotten (but not necessarily low-impact) ones on government organization (1947 Hoover Commission), crime in America (1965), traffic safety (1965), and, comically, quiz-show rigging (1959).

The author creates 'demographic profiles' of all his cases, locating them in history and political time; characterizing their structure and modus operandi in terms of their institutional home (is the investigation being conducted or led by Senate, House, or the presidency?); what triggered them (using McCubbins and Schwartz's well-known distinction between 'police patrol' versus 'fire alarm' logics of oversight activity); the kind of breakdown they investigate (policy, process or personal misconduct); the balance of party-political forces within and around the inquiry (which party controls it, and which party controls House, Senate and presidency); whether they primarily seek to repair past failings or prevent future ones; and so on. He then examines the 'footprints' these inquiries leave, and codes all 100 cases for no less than 100, often complex, footprint indicators, such as breadth of the inquiry, complexity of the breakdown they attend to, seriousness, thoroughness, leverage, and bipartisanship.

In the process of his research, Light has worked through all the reports, many of the underlying documents, piles of contemporary and historical secondary accounts of these investigations, and has interviewed nearly 100 key players. A truly Herculean task, on which he reports with flair and gusto, combining simple arithmetic with illustrative case vignettes.

We learn much from this exercise about historical trends in patterns of investigative activity. There is demonstrably more investigative appetite in the post-Watergate, divided-government era in the American political system. Domestic issues have trumped foreign ones as objects of investigation. Fire alarms have become the dominant trigger. Fact-finding is on the decline; culprit-focused blame-setting exercises are on the rise. Republican-led investigations are more likely to be ideologically driven witch hunts.

With all that descriptive work done, he then seeks to explain varieties in impact in terms of the aforementioned features of these investigations. This is where things start to get a bit intricate, as Light rattles off correlations between his numerous independent and dependent variables and indicators. Fortunately, he provides enough earthy case illustrations and synthetic observations to keep the non-expert reader on board.

Remarkably, the book hardly engages with existing theories of commissions, inquiries, accountability and institutional learning in government. Non-US scholarship – there is for example good work on the impact of Royal Commissions in Westminster systems – does not get a look in. Nor does Light examine whether the within- or post-investigation behaviour of the targets of the investigation – the management of accountability and blame by public office-holders (with prominent work done by European scholars such as Christopher Hood, Mark Bovens, Keith Dowding and others) – has any bearing on the investigation process and its outcomes. A missed opportunity, perhaps triggered by the relatively insular nature of the field of American government that forms Light's intellectual backyard.

One of the upbeat conclusions of the book is that despite the growing polarization in US politics, conducting a 'good investigation' (methodic, well resourced, focused on fact-finding, etc.) still helps to achieve impact: the bigger the 'footprint', the more likely it will contribute to repairing or preventing breakdowns. The book ends in a crescendo with a short but wonderful chapter on how to create impactful investigations that should be read by would-be investigators not just in the US but throughout the democratic world.

Paul 't Hart  
*Utrecht University*