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Jan. 6 commission stalls on Pelosi, McConnell's watches. It didn't have to | Opinion

Carl Golden Special to the USA TODAY Network

Published 4:01 a.m. ET Mar. 23, 2021

Whatever faint flicker of hope remained for the creation of a commission to investigate the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol has been extinguished, another casualty of the polarization gripping Congress.

The idea of a commission similar to that established following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 gained momentum in the immediate aftermath of the assault on the Capitol but floundered when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell disagreed over the makeup of the commission and its scope of responsibility.

Pelosi sought an 11-member panel of seven Democratic appointees and four Republicans while McConnell suggested that the proposed commission expand its inquiry to the violent protests that erupted in several American cities last summer.

Despite their initial expressions of support for a commission, the suspicion lingers that neither Pelosi nor McConnell were seriously committed to it.

Both have been in Congress long enough (Pelosi for 34 years and McConnell for 36) and are intimately familiar with its traditions, customs and maneuverings to understand the most effective way to bury an idea is to create a stalemate based on seemingly reasonable grounds.

Each knew in advance the other would summarily reject their suggestions, normally a preliminary step toward a negotiated compromise. Not this time.

The longer a standoff drags on, interest wanes, other issues emerge to demand attention, the media moves on and it slowly fades from the public consciousness.

McConnell attacked the proposed partisan makeup of the commission as Pelosi's attempt to guarantee a predetermined outcome, one that would place blame on former President Trump

and the Republican Party for inciting their supporters to storm the Capitol to prevent Congressional certification of the Electoral College vote tabulation.

Pelosi criticized expanding the scope of the commission's duties as a distraction designed to focus on the civil unrest and the demands of protestors to defund the police, an issue which many Democrats blamed for the party's stunning loss of 15 House seats in 2020.

Neither the Speaker nor the Republican Leader are eager for a Democratic-dominated commission to spend months — potentially spilling over into the 2022 midterm elections when control of Congress hangs in the balance — in a public debate over the role of ex-president Trump in the Capitol assault (McConnell's fear) or on the politically dangerous demands to defund police departments (Pelosi's concern).

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Neither has shown any indication of backing down or seeking common ground to clear the path for an independent bipartisan commission. They've staked out eminently defensible positions and are prepared to stand by them.

While they arrived at the conclusion independently, Pelosi and McConnell share the political calculation that abandoning the commission proposal poses a far less risk than the perils of thrusting the issue into next year's campaigns.

Both are adept at navigating the cross currents and competing agendas endemic to Congressional politics to achieve a desired outcome. More importantly, each has mastered the inside game — the unspoken wink and nod deal and the promise of future rewards — to either secure a victory or assure a defeat.

With the enactment of the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, the migrant crisis at the southern border, rising demands for action on a massive infrastructure program, tax increases, voting rights and climate change, the Jan. 6 commission tumbled far down the priority list.

Committees in the House and Senate have held hearings on the Capitol siege, taking testimony primarily from law enforcement, the military and intelligence community.

Many believe Congressional committees are the proper and appropriate forum to conduct inquiries into the assault and to propose legislative action to address reported failures in

security preparedness, communications protocols, and the role of the military.

The Biden Administration expressed general support for a commission, but emphasized it was a matter for Congress to decide — a pledge of non-interference and a promise that the President would not pressure Democrats to back its creation.

It was a punt worthy of any Sunday afternoon in the NFL.

It will be left to historians to sift through the evidence and formulate a comprehensive, definitive account of the most serious assault on the center of U. S. government by its own citizens in history.

For now, the American people will confront two truths — a Democratic truth and a Republican one — each promoting explanations and conclusions colored by partisanship and ideology.

Both sides can and will blame a paralyzing polarization for the failure to reach a consensus in support of an independent inquiry, one that, like the 911 commission report, will win the confidence of the American people.

It didn't have to be that way.

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