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John C. Stennis and the Censure of Joseph McCarthy

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A censure in the United States Senate is a formal reprimand disapproving the actions or behavior of a fellow Senator. There is no Constitutional provision for censures but the Senate is provided the ability to expel its members by a two-thirds vote; the censure was adopted as a lesser punishment. In the history of the Senate, only nine Senators have been censured; in 1954, when the resolution was brought against McCarthy that number was five. Though, a censure is does not formally end a Senators career only one of nine Senators has ever gained reelection.

The McCarthy chronicles began with his election to the United States Senate in 1946 and ended with his death while still in office in 1957. During this time period, McCarthyism was the word that scared some and invigorated others. In his hunt for communists in the American government, Joseph McCarthy acted less than tactfully, leading to an investigation and eventually a censure by the United States Senate. In exploring the events of the censure, special attention will be paid to the role of Senator John Stennis as a member of the investigating committee.

Joseph McCarthy was first elected to the United States Senate with the famous class of 1946, which, also, included Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. His first few years in the Senate were unexceptional. McCarthy began to gain considerable fame with a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia in 1950. In the speech to the Republican Women's Club, McCarthy claimed to have evidence that there were up to 205 members of the Communist Party working for the State Department. Following intense media exposure, McCarthy capitalized on the American fear of communism and continued to make speeches and public comments criticizing the Democratic administration for their inadequate security measures for the investigation of communist infiltration of the American government. In response, the Tydings Committee was called to investigate the claims. Since McCarthy had made these accusations against a Democratic administration and a Senate lead by a Democratic majority, the hearings quickly devolved into an investigation into McCarthy and his credibility instead of communist infiltration. The Tydings Committee, lead by Maryland Senator Millard Tydings, was a direct attack on McCarthy. The term 'McCarthyism' was coined during the hearings. Witness Owen Lattimore went head-to-head with McCarthy, and later published a book entitled *Ordeal by Slander* in which he defines 'McCarthyism' as "insists constantly, emotionally, and menacingly that the man who thinks independently thinks dangerously and for an evil, disloyal purpose."

With the 1950 elections, McCarthy heavily campaigned against Democratic candidates, commonly accusing them of being communists. These tactics in the Maryland Senate race led to the defeat of Senator Tydings. The Republicans had a big victory in the 1950 elections, largely as a result of McCarthy's campaigning. Soon McCarthy was seen as one of the most powerful men in the Senate.

A seemingly minor situation for McCarthy would later come back as a big ordeal for both the Senate and McCarthy. In 1951, the Senate Subcommittee on Privileges and Elections began investigating McCarthy for his actions in the 1950 elections based on allegations that he had been a 'dirty campaigner'. The Gillette-Hennings hearings were a disaster for everyone involved because no one came out looking good in the end. Since he was not subpoenaed by the committee, McCarthy refused to appear. When the Committee chairman attacked him for it, McCarthy wrote letters to the committee accusing them of protecting communists. In the end, several members resigned from the subcommittee in disgust including the original chairman. The subcommittee eventually released an inconclusive report that was mostly ignored. The important information resulting from the hearings were the accusations of McCarthy's abuse of other Senators and his obstruction of the investigation by the subcommittee.

McCarthy was re-elected by the people of Wisconsin in 1952. With the beginning of this term, McCarthy was appointed as the chairman of the Senate Committee on Government Operations which included the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Though the Internal Security Subcommittee was normally involved with the investigation of communists, the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations had a flexible mandate allowing McCarthy to



investigate communists in the government. McCarthy appointed Roy Cohn as Chief Counsel and Robert Kennedy as Assistant Counsel to the Committee. In 1953, the Committee began investigating the Army and its facility at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. As the investigation moved forward, its focus became an Army dentist.

In 1952, the Army drafted a New York dentist, Irving Peress, who had been associated with pro-communists groups prior to joining the Army. During his service, Peress was promoted from Captain to Major. McCarthy began investigating and demanded Peress' testimony before his Committee; Peress refused. McCarthy soon contacted the Secretary of the Army demanding Peress' court martial, instead Peress requested that his pending discharge be granted immediately. It was. When Peress' commanding officer, Brigadier General Ralph Zwicker, testified, McCarthy had questions and demanded answers. McCarthy asked why Peress was promoted, and why was he was granted an honorable discharge. General Zwicker was evasive and uncooperative, further enraging McCarthy's confrontational personality. Before Zwicker's testimony ended, McCarthy accused him of being unfit to wear his uniform. Such personal attacks aimed at a battlefield hero were not well received.

In response, the Army decided to strike back through indirect measures. Instead of directly challenging McCarthy on his actions, they brought charges against him and Roy Cohn for pressuring the Army to give special treatment to David Schine. Schine, a former McCarthy aide and personal friend of Cohn, had been drafted. Time and again Cohn had tried to use his position and threats of investigation to obtain privileges for Schine. The Army's accusations resulted in the Army-McCarthy hearings conducted by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations with Republican Karl Mundt as chairman, instead of McCarthy.

As a member of the Armed Services Committee, Senator John Stennis was adamantly opposed to that Committee conducting the investigation, explaining in a letter in May 1954, "I was afraid they would get out of hand... These matters have a way of working themselves out and I hope that soon all the facts will be out and the entire matter settled." The hearings were a unprecedented spectacle with Senators arguing on national television, and McCarthy challenging the credentials and loyalties of other Senators. In the same letter, Stennis warned that "I am opposed and have always been opposed to any Senate investigation being televised... it promotes the dramatic and the theatrical, which quickly degenerates into the burlesque." The Committee's final report though inconclusive, drastically affected McCarthy's popularity. Though McCarthy was never found to be directly involved in any wrong doing, the tremendous exposure of his untactful behavior over six weeks caused most Americans to see McCarthy as a bully. Following the hearings, McCarthy's popularity ratings began to drop; in January 1954, he had a 50% favorable rating by July 1954 it had fallen to 35%. Cohn resigned. The hearings marked the beginning of the end for McCarthy.

Following the hearings, more and more Senators began to disapprove of McCarthy's tactics. As the opposition from both Republicans and Democrats alike mounted, Senators began opposing McCarthy on the Senate floor. On June 11, 1954, Republican Senator Ralph Flanders from Vermont introduced a resolution to strip McCarthy of all his committee assignments. On June 30, 1954, Senator Flanders introduced a resolution to the Senate for the censure of Joseph McCarthy. The resolution stated that "the conduct of the Senator of Wisconsin, Mr. McCarthy, is unbecoming a Member of the United States Senate, is contrary to senatorial traditions, and tends to bring the Senate into disrepute, and such conduct is hereby condemned." The censure resolution was debated on August 2; the next day the Senate voted 75-12 to submit the resolution. The resolution was then sent to committee for investigation.

The Senate Select Committee to Study the Censure of Senator McCarthy, better known as the Watkins Committee, was formed in August 1954. The Committee was made up six members: three Republicans and three Democrats. The Republicans were Arthur Watkins of Utah who served as chair, Frank Case of South Dakota, and Frank Carlson of Kansas. The Democrats were Edwin Johnson of Colorado, John Stennis of Mississippi, and Sam Ervin of North Carolina (who would later be the chairman of the Watergate Committee). Senator Stennis would later respond to letters about his Committee position with "this is a special assignment which I did not seek..." but, "... I can assure you that I am deeply concerned about this matter and I am giving it my utmost and impartial consideration." The Watkins Committee during the first meeting on August 8, 1954 decided not to televise the hearings and, as suggested by Stennis, to derive an action plan to avoid the impression of delayed action. Forty-six separate charges provided with the censure resolution were submitted to the Committee for consideration. The charges were organized into five categories: contempt of the Senate, abusing colleagues, encouraging government employees to violate the law, insulting General Zwicker, and releasing government documents. On September 27, 1954, the Watkins Committee released its final report in which all charges were reviewed, and censure recommended for two. The recommended charges were contempt of Congress for his behavior towards the Gillette-Hennings Subcommittee and his reprehensible conduct towards General Zwicker. Senator Stennis received a detailed analysis of the Watkins Committee report and upheld by an independent source, providing recommendations, based on legal precedent and evidence, supporting the two charges.

The Committee was remarkably bipartisan in developing its conclusions and the report. Senator Stennis wrote to Lyndon Johnson, Senate Minority Leader, on September 30, 1954 stating that "... there was not a trace of partisan or political consideration all the way through..." and that "... the major parts of the report are very carefully prepared and each word chosen for its exact meaning." On October 11, he wrote to Johnson again stating that "there was never a suggestion or intimation of any kind of any political trend in our considerations or our conclusions." Senator Stennis believed that the report was justified on all grounds. In a letter to a constituent following the release of the Watkins report, Senator Stennis defended his position as, "the question is solely one of political morality in Senatorial conduct... he [McCarthy] has always replied [to the Gillette-Hennings Subcommittee] with abusive language." He continued to explain, "my old-fashioned ideas of morality in public life make me believe he should give an explanation" for his actions.

Although Senator Stennis did not seek membership on the Committee he fulfilled his obligation, applauded his colleagues, and acquired their appreciation. Following the Committees work, Senator Stennis wrote letters to the Committee staffers thanking them for

their service with the Committee. In a letter dated September 24, 1954 to Stennis, the Assistant Counsel to the Committee, Guy deFuria, wrote, "I desire to express to you my heartfelt appreciation for your unfailing patience, kindness, and courtesy to me". Stennis' feelings toward his Committee service can best be summed up by a letter to Frank Case in October 1954, in which Stennis states that: "I told Lyndon Johnson when he discussed the matter of appointing me to the committee that I wanted to see a list of prospective members, and was very much pleased when I saw your name on the list... Regardless of the outcome of this matter before the Senate, I feel we rendered a constructive and worthwhile service, and I look forward to serving with you further in the Senate."

The same sentiment was reiterated in similar letters sent to the other Committee members. Stennis, also, sent letters to the Senate Party leaders commending his fellow Committee members on their service, integrity, and hard work during the hearings. As the Committee issued their report, the Senate would begin to decide the future of Joseph McCarthy. Based on the charges against him, McCarthy had a strong case against censure. McCarthy argued that the Gillette-Hennings issue was in Eighty-Second Congress (1951-1953), the previous Congress, therefore the Eighty-Third Congress (1953-1955) had no jurisdiction to investigate or censure for his previous actions. McCarthy did not believe that there was enough evidence on the Zwicker issue for a censure, which gained support when Frank Case decided that a censure on that basis would limit a chairman's ability to question witnesses. Following the release of the report, McCarthy wrote to Watkins and Stennis arguing that the report was incorrect on the Zwicker issue, and asking Watkins to appear before an Investigating Committee to provide any evidence on the issue. McCarthy continued to try to discredit the report and the Committee members to little avail. Senator Watkins wrote to Senator Stennis in late October 1954, saying that he would resist entering a newspaper battle with McCarthy because he believed that "no useful purpose can be served". The other proposed charges were all based on circumstantial evidence. McCarthy's fate would come down to the floor debate which was mounting up to be a dramatic affair.

The floor debate was marked by bickering back and forth by opposition and support of Senator McCarthy. The most notable speech given on the floor was that of Senator Stennis. According to a Reuter's dispatch on November 13, 1954, "The usually so peaceful Mississippi Democrat John Stennis further emphasized that 'unless the Senate agrees that McCarthy should be reprimanded for his behavior, this assembly has lost something great and valuable... then something warped has been accepted by us.'" Senator Stennis' speech can best be summed up with "... the offense lies in the low standards of senatorial conduct... I am not willing to submit to the standards... I am not willing to do so as an individual... I am not willing to do as a Member of the Senate." Senator Prescott Bush (the father of George H.W. Bush and grandfather of George W. Bush) would write to Stennis in December 1954, stating that the report prepared by the Committee and the speech given on the floor were both 'classics'.

In his floor comments testifying to the validity of the report and Stennis speech, Lyndon Johnson said, "The Junior Senator from Mississippi is a symbol of patriotism, integrity, and judicial temperament... In our years of service together, I have never known him to utter a word that was not judicious and that did not represent his sincere and honest convictions." Senator Stennis would later comment that "it would have been a mighty poor Senate, if he had not been called and challenged for his wrong doing." McCarthy had his defenders, Senate Majority Leader William Knowland and Maryland Senator John Marshall Butler, but they did not match up to the opposition. On December 2, 1954, the Senate voted 67 to 22 to censure Joseph McCarthy. Only twenty-two Republicans supported their fellow Senator. The only Democrat not to vote against McCarthy was Massachusetts Senator John F Kennedy who did not vote at all; the Kennedy family had been fervent supporters of McCarthy's anti-communist rhetoric.

Following his censure, Joseph McCarthy's career as a public figure took a major downturn. Though the censure did not remove him from office, it eradicated any credibility he had left in Washington DC. The press and his colleagues in the Senate began to ignore him as he continued his fight against communism. For the next two and one-half years of his life, McCarthy would live in relative obscurity in the Senate. On April 28, 1957, he entered Bethesda Naval Hospital; on May 2 he died while still the Junior Senator from Wisconsin. The official cause of death was acute hepatitis, most likely brought on by heavy drinking, which became heavier following his censure. On May 6, his funeral was held in the Senate Chamber, with almost every Senator present as well Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, Vice President Richard Nixon, and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. McCarthy's body was flown to Appleton, Wisconsin, where nearly 32,000 people visited his open casket at St Mary's Cathedral. A few days later, he was laid to rest in his hometown with twenty-one Senators present as well as his former Committee counsel Robert Kennedy. Joseph McCarthy was 48 years old; he left behind a wife, Jean, and a young daughter, Tierney.

As the hearings began to take off, Senator Stennis claimed to the *Boston Post* that he had received less than a dozen letters about the McCarthy issue, but by the time it was over with he would have received many more. Of those letters, there were more pro-McCarthy prior to the hearings, but more supporting the censure following the release of the report. Most of Stennis' constituents saw the matter as he did: McCarthy was working towards a valiant cause but the ends do not justify the means. Letters supporting Stennis' role and commending his actions on the Committee and his speech came from all over the state as well as the nation. He received letters of support from interesting sources such as newspapers including the *Louisville Courier-Journal* of Kentucky, the *Delta Democrat-Times* of Greenville, the Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot* and the Vicksburg *Evening Post-Herald*; politicians including Mayor Marion Smith of Booneville, and John Alton Phillips and Jack Frost of the Mississippi House of Representatives; Warren County and Sunflower County Boards of Supervisors; Judge Luther Smith and Judge William Neville of the Mississippi Chancery Court; Copiah-Lincoln Junior College President J.M. Ewing; and Encyclopaedia Britannica Chairman William Benton. Senator Stennis' role in this controversy was widely acclaimed and appreciated from the U.S. Capital to the Mississippi Capitol. Senator John Stennis served a significant role on the Senate Select Committee investigating Joseph McCarthy, and used his position to keep the integrity of the Senate intact. Senator Stennis worked to serve the best interest of his constituency, the nation, and the Senate.

About the Author

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Luke Fowler is a Graduate Assistant at the Mississippi State University Library and the John C. Stennis Institute of Government. As a Graduate Assistant, Luke conducts primary research into the congressional papers and political papers located at the Congressional and Political Research Center of the Mississippi State University Library and produces scholarly papers on specific topics related to the extensive career of Mississippi political figures. Luke holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Southern Mississippi, and is currently working on his M.A. in Political Science at Mississippi State University. He finished his undergraduate degree in two and one-half years, graduating from Southern Miss at 19 years old. At Mississippi State, he is receiving training in Geographical Information Systems in complement to his political education. As a member of the Stennis-Montgomery Association, Luke worked as a volunteer at the 2007 debates for both the Governor and the Commissioner of Agriculture. In addition to his scholastic activities, Luke is an alumnus of Pi Kappa Phi fraternity, a certified SCUBA diver, and an avid participant in outdoor activities. Following graduation, Luke plans to continue his education at the doctoral level.

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Jeff is married to the former Leann Mills and has two children, Spencer and Emma Claire.

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