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John C. Stennis and the Watergate Controversy

Authors Luke Fowler and Jeffrey Markham

For two years in the early 1970s, America was enthralled in a Presidential scandal that threatened to forever change the landscape of American politics. During 1973 and 1974, there was one subject that was in every newspaper, being discussed around every corner, and on the mind of every American: Watergate. By mid-May 1973, Gallup polls indicated that 96% of eligible voters in the United States had heard about Watergate. In exploring the events, special attention will be paid to the role and opinions of Senator John Stennis based on his congressional papers.

On June 17, 1972, five men were arrested for breaking into the Democratic National Committee's office in the Watergate complex in Washington, DC. These five men and two others were tried and convicted for the break-in. During the course of the investigation of the break-in, it was uncovered that those seven men were employed by the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP), a controversial group of men established to disrupt the agenda of the political enemies of the Nixon administration. The political powers behind the group quickly moved to cover-up the break-in, employing those aware of the activities of CREEP to engage in more serious crimes than the break-in, such as obstruction of justice and perjury.

The investigation conducted by Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein led to top level employees of the executive branch, including several White House aides that were forced to resign, and then-Attorney General John Mitchell. All were involved in directing CREEP in illegal activities and the cover-up. Woodward and Bernstein gained much of their information from a source known only as Deep Throat. In 2005 Mark Felt, former Deputy Director of the FBI, admitted providing information to the reporters.

Due to tremendous media exposure, the investigation did not stop with the conviction of the original seven. The investigation grew broader when the Senate convened a special committee chaired by Sam Ervin to investigate the involvement of members of the executive branch in the scandal. Starting May 17, 1973 the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Activities, or the Senate Watergate Committee, conducted hearings into the scandal. The Committee was made up of four Democrats and three Republicans, had the broadest possible subpoena power, and a \$500,000 budget. At the same time, Nixon asked the newly appointed Attorney General Elliot Richardson to appoint a Special Prosecutor to conduct an investigation into Watergate. Richardson soon appointed Archibald Cox, the former Solicitor-General in the Kennedy administration. Soon some very powerful and soon damaging information was uncovered.



In early August 1973 at the beginning of the hearings, Senator Stennis expressed confidence in Congress's ability to investigate any impropriety in a letter to a constituent and a friend. The focal point of the hearings soon became, as Senator Howard Baker stated, "What did the President know and when did he know it?" In looking into answering that question, the star witnesses during the hearings became John Dean, former White House Counsel, and Alexander Butterfield, Deputy Assistant to Nixon. Dean's testimony indicated that the President was aware of the activities of CREEP. Butterfield's testimony proved to be much more important. Before testifying before the Committee Donald Sanders, the Deputy Minority Counsel interviewed Butterfield, during which he revealed that the White House had a taping system inside the Oval Office. Butterfield was immediately called before the Committee, at which time Fred Thompson, Chief Minority Counsel, asked, "Are you aware of any listening devices in the Oval Office of the President?" Butterfield confirmed that there were and the entire nation became aware of the infamous Watergate Tapes.

In the midst of the Watergate hearings, the Vice President Spiro Agnew was being investigated by the U.S. Attorney from Maryland on charges of tax evasion. Nixon's administration, under ever-increasing, scrutiny forced Agnew to resign. On October 10, 1973, Agnew became the second Vice President to resign from office; he later plead no contest to charges of tax evasion and money laundering that occurred while he was Governor of Maryland. By suggestion of Congressional leaders, Nixon nominated House Minority Leader Gerald Ford as Vice President on October 12, 1973; he was confirmed by the end of the year. Ford wrote a personal note to John Stennis following his confirmation for all the support Stennis offered him during the process. Ford's accession to the Vice Presidency took a backseat in the media as the Watergate scandal heated up with the advent of the Watergate tapes.

Since they may have been applicable evidence to the investigations of both the Senate Watergate Committee and the Special Prosecutor, the tapes were subpoenaed immediately. Nixon, in response, refused, citing executive privilege. Neither side backed down. Nixon argued that information sensitive to national security was on the tapes; therefore, he should not have to turn them over. After continued pressure, Nixon suggested what would later become known as the Stennis Compromise, in which the Democratic Senator from Mississippi, John Stennis, would play a major role. Senator Stennis' role in the controversy would be to verify the authenticity of the tapes, separate information that may be relevant to the Committee, deliver a transcript of the tapes with the relevant information to the Committee, and prevent the disclosure of any non-relevant information on the tapes. Senator Sam Ervin said in a statement to the press on October 20, 1973 that "Senator Baker and I agreed that the suggestion made by the President afforded reasonable method of settling the controversy..." that they favored the suggestion, and they "... believed that Senator Stennis would be performing a significant service for our country if he accepted the suggested assignment". Though the Committee Chair, Sam Ervin, and the Ranking Minority Member, Howard Baker, both supported this compromise, Cox shot the idea down, and continued to press for the tapes.

On October 20, 1972, in what would later be termed the "Saturday Night Massacre," Nixon ordered Attorney General Richardson to fire Cox; Richardson refused and resigned in protest. Nixon then ordered Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus to fire Cox; he refused and resigned in protest. Consequently, Nixon compelled Solicitor General Robert Bork, the acting head of the Department of Justice, to fire Cox; he complied. In 1978, the Independent Counsel Act, which has since expired, was passed to prevent a similar situation in the future. As a side note, President Bill Clinton and Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy were both investigated under this Act in the 1990s.

A new special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, was appointed to continue the investigation. Under significant pressure from the Senate Watergate Committee, the special prosecutor and the House Judiciary Committee, which began investigating as well, Nixon decided to release transcripts of the tapes with any national security

information edited out. John Stennis responded to requests for Watergate transcripts, telling his constituents that he had only received one copy and they had to order theirs from the Government Printing Office. Jaworski, though, continued his pursuit of the subpoena for all the tapes which led to the Supreme Court. On July 24, 1974, the Supreme Court, containing three Nixon appointees, made a unanimous decision, 8-0, for Nixon to hand over the tapes.

By the summer of 1974, the word 'impeachment' was on the tip of everyone's tongue in Washington. Senator Stennis maintained his stance of not talking about the events. Earlier in 1974 when the scandal was first taking off, he wrote in a 'Washington Report':

"No Senator should place himself in the position of appearing to have prejudged the case in any way, against the possibility that the impeachment procedure should get as far as presentation of evidence to the Senate... So amidst all the talk of Watergate impeachment I want to say only this. The thing that should be done first is to go quietly about developing facts. Then act on the facts and not further drag the matter out."

Senator Stennis said little publicly on Watergate, because as he said to a constituent, I am "... keeping quiet largely because I may have to be a juror". In a letter to Howard Canon, Chair of the Senate Rules Committee, in early April 1974, Stennis advised against televising any impeachment proceedings in the Senate, stating, "we are in trouble enough all ready without having television filming". He continued in the same letter, "to televise proceedings to me would be totally out of keeping with the Senate as an institution". In the same regard as he tried to keep his integrity and that of Senate's intact during the Watergate scandal, he disapproved of those Senators who did speak publicly on the matter. He wrote to Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott, "you are a good keeper of information... it is a pity that the other 99 Senators cannot equal your record". Throughout the controversy, John Stennis supported the administration and spoke little about Watergate.

In late July, Nixon handed over the Watergate tapes. Among those tapes was the so-called 'smoking gun' tape made on June 23, 1972. Five days after the Watergate break-in Nixon agreed that the White House should have the Director of the CIA request that the Director of the FBI halt the investigation into the break-in for national security purposes. This directly implicated the President in the cover-up, which was a criminal conspiracy to obstruct justice. By late July, the House Judiciary Committee had already raised articles of impeachment against Nixon. Republican House leaders announced that they would vote for impeachment against the President, making a trial in front of the Senate inevitable. Republican Senate leaders announced that they would no longer support the President.

On August 8, 1974, Nixon met with 46 members of Congress before addressing the nation, among them was John Stennis. William Timmons, the President's Director of Congressional Affairs, sent Senator Stennis a note the following day thanking him for standing by the President and being there for him before he spoke to the nation; attached to the note was a memento from Nixon, a transcript of his resignation speech. Under intense pressure, President Richard Nixon became the first President in the history of the United States to resign from office on August 9, 1974.

During the entire Watergate scandal, Senator Stennis received hundreds of letters from constituents expressing their opinions on the situation. Most Mississippians supported Nixon and his administration and urged Stennis to do so as well. Those letters came from all over the state. Among those who sent supporting letters were the Mayor of Starkville, the Corinth City Council, and the Attorney General of Mississippi. Judging from the letters sent to Stennis, most Mississippians applauded the role offered to Stennis, considering it to be an honor. Only a small portion of the letters were unfavorable towards the President, expressing support for

impeachment. Those letters most came from the Mississippi Gulf Coast and from native Mississippians living in other states at the time.

Stennis' common response to the letters, as he said in a letter he sent to a friend in Magnolia, Mississippi in June 1974, was that he felt that after the investigation has been completed, the integrity of the office of the presidency would be upheld. On the surface, Senator John Stennis may have played a seemingly minor role in the Watergate scandal, but the proposed Stennis Compromise set the events in motion that led to the last days of the President.

Through it all, Stennis supported the integrity of the office of the president, served his constituents, and sought the best outcome for the nation.

About the Author

LUKE FOWLER, RESEARCH ASSISTANT

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.

Editor

JEFFREY MARKHAM, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE III / SIG RESEARCH LIAISON

Jeffrey Markham is a Research Associate III at the John C. Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University and an Adjunct Instructor of History and Political Science at Itawamba Community College. As a Research Associate, Jeff provides human resources-related technical assistance to local governments throughout the State of Mississippi. Jeff personally developed the methodology for the annual Mississippi Municipal Compensation Survey and is responsible for its publication each year. Jeff holds a B.A. in History and an M.P.P.A. in Public Policy and Administration, both from Mississippi State University, where he is also a doctoral student, having completed all course work associated for a Ph.D. in Community College Leadership.

In addition, Jeff functions as the Coordinator of Civic Education at the Institute as well as the Institute's liaison to the Congressional & Political Research Center of the MSU Libraries. As the Institute's historiographer, he is committed to the accessibility of history and politics. He is also the editor of the Congressional and Political Research Center Brief as well as a contributing author.

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

About the Institute



Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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