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John C. Stennis and the 1947 Senate Campaign

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In 1947, a special Senate election would change the course of political history in Mississippi and the nation for years to come. The 1947 campaign of John Stennis would catapult him to Washington, setting him on the path to becoming one of the most respected political figures in Mississippi history. In discussing the special Senate election, special attention will be paid to the campaign of John Stennis.

In November 1945, Theodore Bilbo was re-elected to a third term as Senator. The former-Governor had been a strong supporter of segregationist policies for most of his career. At the beginning of the 1946 session, the Senate refused to seat Bilbo at the behest of Idaho Democrat Glen Taylor based on accusations of impropriety in Bilbo's re-election campaign. After his July victory in the Democratic primary, a group of African-Americans from Mississippi sent a petition to the Senate charging Bilbo with purposefully making inflammatory appeals that "stirred up racial tensions, provoked violence, and kept many black citizens away from polling places." A Senate investigation by two separate committees ensued. Amidst the uncertainty of his seat, Bilbo returned to Mississippi for cancer treatment. The first committee found that he ran a "crude and tasteless campaign" but that he should be seated. The second committee found that he had used campaign contributions for his personal use. In early 1947, Bilbo underwent several cancer treatments in Jackson, none of which were effective.

At the beginning of the 80th U.S. Congress, the Senate had to decide whether to seat Bilbo. On August 21, 1947, Senator Theodore Bilbo passed away, ending the controversy, and leaving his Senate seat open. The law required a special election within three months with the winner securing the most votes, not a majority; the law was later changed to require a majority. Governor Fielding Wright set the special election date for November 4, 1947, giving the candidates approximately eight weeks to run a campaign. With no primary, the special election was a race between six candidates: William Colmer, Ross Collins, Forrest Jackson, Paul B. Johnson, John Rankin, and John Stennis.

William Colmer was the Representative of the 6th Congressional District in the House of Representatives. Originally from Moss Point, Colmer attended Millsaps College, and was elected as Jackson County District Attorney in 1928. In 1932, he was elected to the House as a New Deal Democrat, eventually serving 40 years in Congress, longer than any other Mississippian in the House except Jamie Whitten. Colmer was a strong candidate in his Congressional District. Ross Collins graduated from the University of Kentucky at Lexington and University of Mississippi Law. He served as Mississippi Attorney General (1912-1920) as well as ten nonconsecutive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1921-1935/1937-1943). He ran unsuccessful campaigns for Governor in 1919 and the Democratic Senate nomination in 1934 and 1941. For the most part, Collins failed to gain widespread support throughout the state. Forrest Jackson was a lawyer who worked with the NAACP and represented African-American clients, though he apparently made white supremacist speeches in his campaign. He had never served as an elected official, but had a successful law practice, serving as Senator Bilbo's attorney during the controversy over his Senate seat. He gained support from the conservative whites throughout the state. Paul B. Johnson, Jr. from Hattiesburg was the son



of a former Governor and Congressman. Johnson graduated from the University of Mississippi School of Law, but was inexperienced politically before the campaign. He would eventually serve as U.S. Attorney, Lieutenant Governor, and Governor of Mississippi. Johnson's strength came from his name recognition. He was commonly referred to as "little Paul Johnson." John Rankin, another graduate of University of Mississippi School of Law, served as the prosecuting attorney of Lee County. In 1921, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, remaining until 1953. He had served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1932, 1936, and 1940, and was strongest in the northeast portion of the state, where his Congressional District was located. John Stennis of DeKalb was a graduate of Mississippi State College (now Mississippi State University) and University of Virginia Law. He served in the Mississippi House of Representatives, as the district prosecuting attorney for Kemper County, and as a Circuit Court Judge. He would go on to represent Mississippi in the Senate for more than 40 years. Stennis was well known in the east central portion of the state and appealed to rural whites.

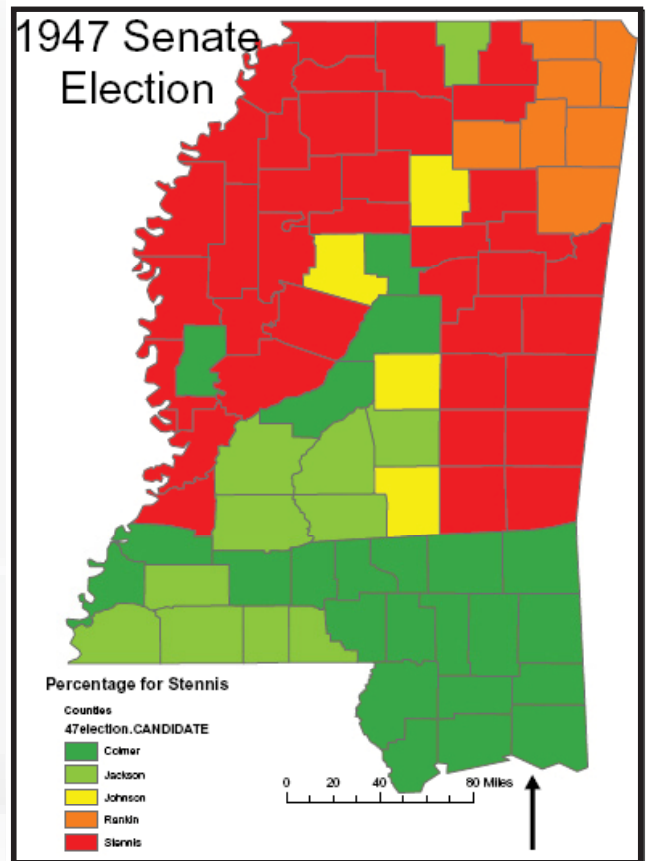
The field of candidates was made up of two current Congressmen, a former Congressman, a former Governor's son, the former Senator's attorney, and a judge from Kemper County. To effectively compete in the race, the Stennis campaign had established an organization for a statewide race. The campaign leaders formulated a plan for the organization in a memo presumably sent to all their county organizations. The plan called for the utilization of one of two plans of organization for every county: 1) "The County Chairman Plan with a single coordinating head"; or 2) "A County Council representing... all factions." The headquarters put the burden of choosing a plan on local friends and supporters. From there, four committees were organized: Publicity, Finance, Contact, and Communication. The Publicity Committee was to prepare a local plan for publicity in the county and coordinate that with the statewide campaign plan. The Finance Committee was to "reach into every corner of the County" to find "investments in good government". The policy of the state campaign was "that no bills will be contracted unless 'Cash is in the Bank.'" The Contact Committees were organized into Women and Men Voters Divisions with each responsible for contacting every voter in the area. Those voters who were willing to support or work for Judge Stennis were given campaign assignments. The Communication Committee was to "contact every person who will agree to write a post card or letter to their relatives and friends throughout the State, asking for the active support of our Candidate." The County Organizations were given the option to use other plans, but only under close connection to the State Headquarters.

In looking for potential supporters, the County Organizations identified the Mississippi State College Alumni, County Officials, Newspaper Editors, State Legislators, County Agents, and Lawyers in there area. The State Campaign established a list of special friends that were campaign supporters. The State Campaign, also, had a list tentatively titled the "Big Thirteen" who were especially active campaign supporters from around the state, which included future Governor J.P. Coleman, future President of Copiah Lincoln Community College J.M. Ewing, and E.P. Littlejohn, the former manager of Fielding Wright's campaign. Another future Governor, William Winter, was included on the list of campaign supporters from Grenada County. The Campaign had some help from out-of-state as well with support coming from Pennsylvania Congressman Hugh Scott, Jr., Washington and Lee University President Dr. Francis Gaines, the *Times-Picayune*, and the *New York Times Southern Correspondent*. With organization and support in place, the eight-week campaign began to take off.

The major challenges of any campaign usually revolve around budgets and expenses. According to an interview with S.R. Evans in 1973, "... We decided he was going to run, so we put up \$1000 a piece. It was 17 of us. We put up \$17,000." Evans continued to state that "...It didn't cost us over about \$39,000" for the entire campaign. In 1996, the average candidate for Senate rose to more than \$3.5 million. Though, according to Evans, Stennis "... never asked for a dollar." The State Campaign set up its headquarters in the King Edward Hotel with Bob Murrow as the campaign manager. The King Edward was once a center for political and social life in Mississippi. The King Edward cost \$12.50 a day. Bob Murrow "didn't get a dime". The Stennis Campaign ran up nearly \$1350 in expenses at the King Edward for rent and office-related expenses and over \$200 in September and early October in office supplies from Smith Office Supply in Jackson. The biggest expense, though, was advertising. In the last week and one-half of the campaign, more than \$1,500 was spent on advertising including \$450 to two different advertising agencies and over \$200 to newspapers including the *Durant News*, the *Daily News*, and the *Clarion-Ledger*. The Stennis Campaign spent nearly \$150 in radio advertisements with WMOX of Meridian and WROB of West Point during the final week of the campaign. Stennis did not rely on television for campaigning because, according to his son, "... There weren't many sets in the state," but "...he did a five minute spot on election evening..." With the money matters taken care of, the campaign was moving in the right direction.

The Stennis Campaign's main objective was to establish and subsequently carry out a grass-roots campaign. The campaign signs showed a young Judge John Stennis and boasted that he was "Trained-Trustworthy-Progressive." The campaign letters stated that, "Judge Stennis has the education, training, character, ability, and prominence that should be required of our U.S. Senator," all of which he would prove to be true. An internal campaign memo shows that the Stennis campaign mailed out over 15,000 letters across the state to individuals, businesses, county officials, and physicians of which over 5,000 were sent to Hattiesburg where both Colmer and Johnson had support. In addition to the letters, over 10,000 cards were sent to voters. John Hampton Stennis who accompanied his father on the campaign trail, said that "basically one speech was taken to 82 counties; there was a place in the speech where local issues were discussed." It was "...probably the last major campaign run almost entirely on the courthouse square." The memorable speech that Stennis gave all over the state always ended the same way:

"I want to go to Washington as a free and unfettered servant of the great body of people who carry the everyday burdens of life. I want to go there with express instructions, with express instructions from the people to pass on all matters fairly and impartially and with a view to the public good. It is my political creed and I have followed it too long to abandon it now. I want to plow a straight furrow right on down to the end of my row."



Election results illustrating counties carried by each candidate in the 1947 special Mississippi Senate election

The last line became a slogan for Stennis. Unlike some of the other candidates though, he never made his message or the campaign about race. According to John Hampton Stennis, "He never heard his father utter any racial slur... he certainly did not during the campaign." Stennis never commented on race, "as opposed to constitutional issues such as states' rights." His stance was in stark contrast to that of some of his opponents as well as his predecessor Bilbo. John Stennis was running on a platform of serving his constituents, which is exactly what he did.

On November 4, 1947, the Special Senate Election was held. An unimposing 191,719 citizens turned out to vote. When the polls closed, Mississippi had a new Senator to take the vacant seat of the former Theodore Bilbo. With all the votes counted, John Stennis won 52,068 (27.16%) votes overall which gave him the election. A majority of the votes were not needed to win only the largest amount of votes. He had won the most votes in 37 of the 82 counties. His areas of strength were in east central Mississippi around Meridian, Columbus, and his hometown of DeKalb. He carried the Delta from Vicksburg to Memphis, and from Grenville to Grenada. Around his hometown, he did not win a county by less than 60% of the vote including 93% in Kemper County, 72% in Noxubee County, and 67% in Neshoba County. Bill Colmer received 45,725 (23.85%) votes, winning in 23 counties. He found his strength in his Congressional District on the coast and in southeastern Mississippi. He did well around Natchez and a few counties in the central part of the state. Forrest Jackson wound up in third place with 43,642 (22.76%) votes, having won ten counties around Jackson and southwestern Mississippi. Paul B Johnson Jr. gained 27,159 (14.17%) votes with prevalence in four counties through the north central portion of the state. John Rankin won seven counties with 24,492 (12.77%) votes. Rankin did well in northeast Mississippi and around Tupelo, the area where he represented as a Congressman. Ross Collins only received 623 (0.32%) votes, with his highest county count coming from Hinds with 28 votes. The candidates found their particular areas of strength, but it was John Stennis' ability to win over major portions of the state that clinched his victory.

The victory of John Stennis in the special election marked a new era in Mississippi politics. Following the election, Stennis received congratulations from his many supporters and friends from all over the state, as well as congratulatory letters from out of state friends including: Chief Justice James Alexander of the Texas Supreme Court, President

Joel Fletcher of Southeastern Louisiana University, Commissioner PA Lockhart of the Western Texas U.S. District Court, President G.D. Humphrey of the University of Wyoming, and *New York Times Southern Correspondent's* John Pophan. His opponents took the time to applaud the newly elected Senator for his campaign efforts. Two days after the election, Paul B Johnson Jr. wrote to Stennis in a telegram, "Accept my congratulations and be assured that I stand ready to assist you in any endeavor for the benefit of our state." In response, Stennis thanked him and said he would count on Johnson's "cooperation in all work for the betterment of Mississippi." That November, Stennis rode the train to Washington, D.C. with family and friends to be sworn in as the Junior Senator from Mississippi. He would go on to be reelected six times until his retirement in 1989. His tenure ran from November 5, 1947 to January 3, 1989 making him the second longest serving Senator in history at the time of his retirement. He has since been passed in years of service by only five Senators.

The unexpected death of Senator Bilbo in 1947 led to a special election that shaped the political history of Mississippi for more than four decades. The election drew a wide field of candidates, but in the end, a judge from Kemper County beat the competition. John Stennis would go on to serve his state with the "prominence that should be required of [a] U.S. Senator" during the whole of his 42 years in office.

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.

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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