

THE APPEARED
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U.S. Senate, From Floor to Mailbags

By Robert Conot

The Rev. Billy Graham delivered the opening prayer. Pete V. Domenici (R-N.M.), chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, and Lawton Chiles (D-Fla.), the ranking minority member, took turns lambasting Office of Management and Budget Director James C. Miller III and the Administration's proposal to eliminate 43 programs from the budget. Two other members of the majority, moderate Rudy Boschwitz (R-Minn.) and conservative William L. Armstrong (R-Colo.) battled each other. Armstrong said he was perplexed:

"We are in the sixth year of an Administration, the most conservative President in our lifetime. The Senate is under control of a bipartisan conservative majority. Yet . . . we have runaway federal spending—rising every year. Now, it is my observation that most people out in the country who have thought about it think that Congress is populated by a bunch of gutless wonders, and in general I think that perception is correct."

In the sparsely occupied galleries a few score tourists sat glassy-eyed, looking down on the all-but-empty chamber where no more than a handful of senators were present. Even they disappeared, seemingly perversely, when Domenici suggested "the absence of a quorum," an observation of a not unusual condition. "Mr. Abdnor . . . Mr. Andrews . . . Mr. Armstrong . . ." the clerk began to call the roll in a soporific voice, no more than one name every 30 seconds.

It was a representative day in the oratorical minuet of the Senate of the United States; and when the tourists departed they were less comprehending of—and less impressed by—the procedures of the upper chamber of Congress than when they had arrived.

The Senate is an institution that has always marched to its own drummer, succored until Prohibition by whiskey decanters and snuffboxes strategically placed in the chamber. The framers of the Constitution intended this to be a patriotic body, counselor to the President and counterweight to the popularly elected

House of Representatives. Though the Founding Fathers favored democracy, they didn't quite trust it.

The Senate has indeed often been, as it is now, a fulcrum between the White House and the House of Representatives. The six-year, overlapping terms of senators give the body a stability and continuity beyond that of the presidency and the House. Independence and individuality are, consequently, senatorial hallmarks. The necessity to campaign statewide, to expend large sums of money for election and to appeal to a diversity of voters, have tended to make senators older, wealthier and more representative of the mainstream of the electorate. The ideological Republicanism of the White House is generally not the pragmatic Republicanism of the Senate. The crosscurrents in the Senate tend to blur party distinctions; when Dwight D. Eisenhower was President, he had better relations with moderate and conservative Democrats than with many members of his own party. The fact that senators represent states, rather

promote regionalism, particularly during the one-party, Democratic era in the South, when the same senators were returned election after election. Seniority helped them gain control of Senate machinery and solidarity gave them power far beyond their numbers.

But the dynamics that can further a state's Senate influence can, conversely, also diminish it, as has happened in California during the past 30 years. Since the abolition of cross-filing in the 1950s, Republican Party senatorial contests have been dominated by the right wing; mossbacks defeated the party's best hope for senatorial longevity, moderate Thomas Kuchel, in 1968, only to see him replaced by a liberal centrist Democrat, Alan Cranston. The other seat, vacated by conservative William F. Knowland in 1958, turned into a musical chair, occupied by a succession of one-term, largely amateur politicians. They left scarcely a mark beyond the names they carved in their desks—a peculiar senatorial custom that dates back to the days when Sam Houston whiled away the hours by whittling wooden hearts that he passed up to ladies in the gallery.

Since seniority is almost synonymous with influence, Cranston has carried the principal burden of representing the state for the past 18 years. During this epoch California has far outstripped all other states in diversity and size of its economy and population. With almost 26 million people, the state is 50% more populous than New York, its nearest competitor, and exceeds in numbers the combined total of the 22 least populous states. It is No. 1 in agriculture, No. 1 in the value of

manufactures, No. 1 in defense expenditures—and a close second to New Jersey in number of toxic sites. It is, in other words, America's first superstate.

While most senators need stay atop only a limited number of issues affecting their states, Cranston and Republican Pete Wilson are compelled to keep up with virtually every hearing, every bill and every debate. There is scarcely an issue or problem affecting America that does not have an impact on California. A senator from California is not simply a legislator but the chief of an office employing about 75 people—and actually needing a good many more. Yet he receives only about \$1.7 million for annual staff and office expenses, while senators from states with populations of 1 million or less get \$1 million each.

Wilson, a mainstream, conservative-leaning Republican who slithered through party mine fields to win nomination and election in 1982, appears to have an excellent chance of being the first occupant of the seat in a quarter-century to win reelection. A one-time state legislator and popular former mayor of San Diego, his forte is organization. He was not pleased when, during his first couple of years in Washington, wags were saying: "Pete Wilson defeated Jerry Brown for senator—and neither has been heard from since." Yet it takes about that much time to build a staff, organize an office and even settle in domestically. During one of the early months, Wilson, carrying a pail, mop and various other cleaning devices, was refused admittance by a Senate guard. His chief of staff had to vouch for Wilson being a senator masquerading as a janitor, and not vice versa.

A generation ago, Sen. Ralph Flanders of Vermont personally answered the half-dozen letters a week he received from constituents. Today, the mailbags are trundled in on hand dollies and spill 15,000 to 20,000 pieces a week in both Cranston's and Wilson's offices. The bulk is topical, dealing with specific legislative issues. Much of it is generated by special interests that "personalize" the correspondence in a half-dozen different versions by computer. Every piece is sorted and processed, then responded to according to one of 1,000 forms and variations stored in computers. Virtually every staff member participates in a process that takes up half of all office time.

A visitor is impressed by the quality, dedication and diversity of the staffs. Cranston's chief legislative adviser for the past 18 years, John Steinberg, clerked for retiring Chief Justice Warren Burger when Burger was an appellate court judge; he could quintuple his income with a law firm. Wilson's defense expert, Mark Albrecht, is a medievalist who holds a doctorate and was previously an analyst with the CIA—a perfect background, he says, "considering the Byzantine maneuverings that go on here."

Wilson's operation is more structured than Cranston's and the staffs tend to reflect the personalities of the senators.

Wilson's has the enthusiasm of youth. Cranston's is more experienced, more skeptical of the bureaucracy. Both staffs are spread thin; 60- or 70-hour work weeks are common.

Ninety-five percent of legislative business is conducted in committee, sometimes referred to as "kitchen work," as well as in private meetings between staffs and between senators. What occurs on the floor merely represents the tip of the legislative iceberg—confirmation and packaging of a product that has been crafted elsewhere. Most orations are designed for the Congressional Record, perhaps the most voluminous, rarely read publication in history. Now it will be interesting to see whether television has any effect on senatorial style. The quorum call, which typically bewilders spectators, is a device to place the Senate in suspended animation while senators confer in the cloakrooms since, according to one of the more arcane traditions, once the Senate is called to order, action cannot be suspended for even one minute without triggering a recess.

The ultimate in legislative permissiveness is the filibuster, truly an endurance contest; senators cannot pause for 10 seconds without risk of losing the floor. But since senators are subject to the same biological processes as less exalted creatures, they are forced to equip themselves with an appropriate device strapped to a lower extremity. One day in 1954 when Estes Kefauver (D-Tenn.) had been declaiming for six hours, his device began descending, threatening to spill its contents. In desperation he had to plead for unanimous consent to be excused.

Until Lyndon B. Johnson, as majority leader, began to use these so-called "unanimous consent agreements" to schedule bills, the Senate conducted business in a largely unstructured atmosphere. It was difficult to tell what would be on the floor at any given time, how long debate would last and when a vote would be called. Johnson's reform has made it somewhat easier to plan ahead; still, surprises do occur. One day Wilson was having lunch when a staffer rushed in: "You'd better get to the floor right away, senator." When Wilson arrived in the chamber, he discovered that, in his words, "the distinguished but sneaky senator from Kentucky was trying to offload half the liquor tax increase onto California wine."

Wilson has a puckish sense of humor, and can be an engaging mime and hooper when he loosens his inhibitions. But as a senator he is very much aware of his image. Cranston, to the contrary, is uncomfortable with formality—at his insistence staffers call him Alan. When he flies to California—three weekends out of every four—he buys coach tickets; and when he runs in track meets, as he has since high school, he blends right in to the senior-citizen field.

The Senate is still one of the world's most exclusive clubs but the nature of its leadership has changed. No longer would the members look the other way as they did when Robert Kerr (D-Okla.) used his position to promote the interests of the Kerr-McGee Oil Co., or when Elmer Thomas (D-Okla.), chairman of the Agriculture Committee, bought and sold commodity futures in accordance with his committee's actions.

What is needed now is a better understanding of the Senate by the federal community as well as the general public. "You'd be surprised how many people have no contact with or conception of Capitol Hill," said Albrecht of Wilson's staff. "They have this cartoon image of Sodom and Gomorrah. To thousands of people who work in the executive branch, as I did, Congress is one of the best-kept secrets." □

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