

AWAKENING THE NATION: MISSISSIPPI SENATOR JOHN C. STENNIS, THE WHITE
COUNTERMOVEMENT, AND THE RISE OF COLORBLIND CONSERVATISM, 1947-1964

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INTRODUCTION

An American Senator

It was the summer of 1988, and Senator John C. Stennis was retiring. He said he could no longer “pull the load” like younger senators, so the present term would be his last.¹ A man of Stennis’s stature was not likely to go quietly. On 23 June, at an honorary dinner before an audience of the nation’s political elite at the Washington Sheraton Hotel, President Reagan offered tribute to the elderly Senator:

The man we honor is no ordinary individual...Over four decades of service in the United States Senate...the humble man who came to Washington from a small town in Mississippi has made an impression on American government that is difficult to measure and hard to fully describe...Mississippi can take pride in the accomplishments of John Stennis, but he is a *United States Senator*, and so we celebrate his contribution to *all* of America.²

Reagan was right to claim John Stennis for the nation, but his convenient elision of Stennis’s lifelong defense of White supremacy revealed the terms on which that claim would be made. Stennis could enter the pantheon of great American senators so long as the influence of his segregationist commitments was forgotten. In fact, it is precisely for his devotion to White supremacy, not in spite of it, that Stennis should be remembered as a national figure, an American Senator.

¹ “Dinner Honoring Senator John Stennis,” C-Span Video Library, accessed 7 July, 2013, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/Dinner>

² Ibid.

Stennis spent sixty years in public life, and his four decades as a United States Senator spanned eight presidential administrations. His colleagues, North and South, admired him for the integrity of his convictions and the unflappable dignity with which he carried himself. He chaired the first Senate Ethics Committee, and became popularly known as a “conscience” for the Senate.³ A consummate Cold Warrior, he rose to chairman of the Armed Services Committee during the Vietnam War. At the height of his powers he wielded more influence over foreign policy than perhaps anyone else on Capitol Hill.⁴ During the course of his career Stennis fought against everything from labor unions and federal welfare programs to deficit spending and abortion. Yet the foundation of his politics was a pervasive sense of racial paternalism coupled with a determination to defend the only way of life he had ever known. He arrived in the Senate in 1947 animated by a potent conviction: the civil rights agenda was a danger to the country, and it called into question whether the Constitution and the American tradition of local control would be sacrificed on the altar of Black freedom. Stennis was confident that when framed in this way, Whites outside the South would value their traditional prerogatives more highly than Black civil rights. He believed that at bottom White Americans, of whatever region, were much the same.⁵

³ Steven V. Roberts, “Wisdom in Judgment, 38 Years in the Making,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1985, B10.

⁴ Michael S. Downs, “Advise and Consent: John Stennis and the Vietnam War, 1954-1973,” *The Journal of Mississippi History* LV (1993): 88.

⁵ Speech to Conference of Mississippi Democrats, 12 February 1948, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 2, John C. Stennis Collection, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mississippi State University Libraries. Hereafter, JCS.

This thesis argues that Stennis and the White supremacist forces he personified actively contributed to the rise of the contemporary racial order. This White supremacist inheritance is visible in the assumptions of colorblindness, the defining characteristic of the modern American racial consensus.⁶ Yet the vital influence of Stennis and his allies on the rise of the colorblind consensus is underexplored. He was a product of the Deep South, but he consistently attempted to nationalize his concerns by reaching out to conservative Whites nationwide. In doing so, he pioneered the language of colorblind conservatism that would come to dominate American racial discourse in the latter decades of the twentieth century. He spoke of individual rights, racial colorblindness, and strict adherence to the Constitution for the seemingly paradoxical purpose of preserving racial hierarchy. He became a key player in a White countermovement whose resistance to the civil rights movement successfully preserved significant measures of White privilege. He was, in sum, an early embodiment of many of the forces that would remake American society and politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

For much of Stennis's life, the notion that a White supremacist from Mississippi could be of national importance to conservatism perplexed many American intellectuals.

⁶ The colorblindness of the contemporary racial-political order is characterized by the collapsing of distinctions between race-conscious public policy and racial discrimination itself. Deliberate state action to solve racial problems is thereby delegitimized. This logic was typified by Chief Justice John Roberts in his criticism of school integration efforts in the 2007 case, *Parents Involved in Community Schools et al. v. Seattle School District No. 1 et al.* Roberts famously said, "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." Such sentiments are reinforced by pervasive assumptions about individualism, rights, and opportunity that allow Americans to discuss deeply racialized subjects without acknowledging their racial content. The distorting screen of colorblindness obscures the "possessive investment in whiteness" that continues to mark American life. See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Revised Edition, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). See also, Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

The South was often portrayed as a backward and aberrant region cut off from the political trends of the rest of the nation. Mississippi was regularly seen as the epicenter of this backwardness. In his classic study of southern politics published in 1949, V.O. Key wrote that northerners caricatured the South “as one large Mississippi,” while southerners put “Mississippi in a class by itself” and “Thanked God” for it because any state could measure itself against Mississippi and seem to come out ahead. Other southerners viewed Mississippi as “the last vestige of a dead and dying civilization.”⁷ In a few cases White Mississippians themselves looked in the mirror and did not like what they saw. In the aftermath of the crisis at Ole Miss in 1962 James W. Silver famously wrote of Mississippi as “The Closed Society.”⁸ W.J. Cash faulted his region for its “characteristic vices” including an “attachment to fictions and false values, above all too great attachment to racial values and a tendency to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values...”⁹

Running through works by southerners and nonsoutherners alike was a tendency to view the South as a world apart, something different and perhaps less fully American. The trend has persisted, as studies for which other regions of the country have few counterparts continue to pour off the shelves. For many, the South remains “a region at

⁷ V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Vintage, 1949), 229.

⁸ James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012, originally published 1964).

⁹ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Garden City, 1954), 426.

odds.”¹⁰ Only in recent years have historians begun to mount a sustained challenge to this narrative.¹¹ In *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino encourage scholars “to explore how both southern and American history are transformed when the South is no longer exceptional but, rather, fully integrated into the national narrative.”¹² By situating Stennis in a national context this study embraces a similar aim and challenges the traditional view of the South as an aberrant region with little to say about the rest of the nation. Stennis’s eventual success in nationalizing the concerns of his southern constituents does not negate southern distinctiveness, but it implies that, as Stennis believed, the rest of the country had more in common with the South than it often wanted to admit.

At the height of the civil rights movement it was tempting to think Stennis and the forces he represented could be dismissed as relics of a bygone age. But his ability to transmute his Deep South paternalism into a broader sense of nationally palatable colorblind conservatism anticipated Americans’ shifting racial and political attitudes in the second half of the twentieth century.¹³ Stennis, his state, and the millions of people

¹⁰ Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994).

¹¹ See for example, Byron E. Shafer and Richard Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism: Class, Race, and Partisan Change in the Postwar South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). See also Brett Gadsden, *Between North and South: Delaware, Desegregation, and the Myth of American Sectionalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹² Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds. *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

¹³ In drawing this connection my purpose is not to add to the voluminous literature describing the modern Republican Party’s turn to racial conservatism. Indeed, Stennis’s lifelong identification with the Democratic Party and Jimmy Carter’s public embrace of Stennis and other White supremacists in 1976 complicates the simplistic narrative of Republican opportunism, underscoring the extent to which both parties sought the favor of White racial conservatives.

who supported him went from outsiders to insiders, from backward looking vestiges of the past to a movement on the cutting edge of America's changing political and social landscape. In the first six presidential elections in which Stennis was in the Senate, Mississippi voted for a losing candidate all six times. In the last five elections of his career Mississippi voted with the winning ticket every time. To be sure, this required a significant degree of accommodation on the part of Stennis and other backers of colorblind conservatism who had to give up the defense of blatant White supremacy. Yet it also underscored the extent to which the defense of a less explicit White privilege could occupy the American mainstream.¹⁴

Stennis's rhetorical defense of White supremacy bore little resemblance to the demagoguery of earlier eras. The rhetoric of colorblind conservatism was Stennis's most potent means of positioning himself as a national conservative and broadening his appeal. He invariably explained his opposition to civil rights laws by invoking the rights of the individual, the imperative of local control, and the original intent of the Constitution. He often did so without any mention of race. His method of argument belies the popular perception of Mississippi as a bastion of mindless hate and crude demagoguery. To be sure, traditional White southern paternalism frequently—perhaps unconsciously—leaked into his arguments, especially during the 1940s and 1950s. But he consistently attempted

¹⁴ For an example of the new efforts to link southern racial politics and national conservatism, see Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). This new strain of thought is distinct from the old "Southern Strategy" thesis whose simplistic top-down approach emphasized the South being acted upon by cunning national leaders. The new historiography emphasizes complex and grassroots changes that occurred in the South as early as the New Deal—changes that Richard Nixon and others eventually capitalized on rather than created.

to speak in a way that would appeal not only to his White Mississippi constituents, but to a national audience.

Stennis's adoption of such language has important implications for the recent historiography on the rise of colorblind conservatism in the suburbs of the Sunbelt South.¹⁵ For if the new suburbs populated by a burgeoning White middle class produced a new sort of conservatism, why were its adherents echoing language White supremacists like John Stennis had already employed in the Deep South? What was new in the emerging Sunbelt was not so much the language or ideological underpinnings of colorblind conservatism, but the potency of its appeal and the newfound credibility granted to it by millions of White Americans. Ironically, the unprecedented popularity of this language had its origins in the very changes Stennis fought against. As long as Stennis and other White southerners upheld explicit White supremacy and restricted the right to vote, their fealty to constitutional principle rang hollow to a critical mass of Americans. Yet in the years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, the language of colorblind conservatism gained new credence. No longer tied down to defending officially sanctioned White supremacy, segregationists like Stennis were liberated to repackage their old arguments to maintain as much White privilege as possible in the new racial order. With the most glaring excesses of discrimination no longer officially countenanced, many Whites felt offended by proactive efforts to redress wrongs and create opportunity for Black Americans. Stennis's arguments made sense to

¹⁵ See Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

these Whites as they turned toward what Kevin Cruse calls a “new conservatism predicated on a language of rights, freedoms, and individualism,” the very sort of conservatism Stennis had been advocating for nearly two decades.¹⁶

The burden of my argument is not to show that Stennis and his fellow Deep South White supremacist elites created this language on their own. Rather, merely demonstrating that Stennis participated in it before it was popularized in the Sunbelt South reveals that the rise of colorblind conservatism was more temporally and geographically diffused than much of the scholarship has acknowledged. Even Mississippi, “the most southern place on earth,” partook of the broader trends in American life and politics after World War II and contributed to the rise of modern conservatism.¹⁷ For all the distinctiveness of the Deep South, Stennis’s rhetoric shows that consigning it to a separate category of analysis distorts the historical record. Though the new suburbanites might have appeared to possess little in common with old southern planters, “they inherited a language of individualism and privilege that white democracy’s defenders had deployed in earlier decades.”¹⁸ Far from being isolated members of a world apart, Deep South White supremacists contributed to the way modern Americans understood and talked about race and rights in the post-civil rights movement era.

¹⁶ Kruse, *White Flight*, 6.

¹⁷ James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Stennis is a representative figure rather than a solitary one. He embraced a White countermovement whose influence remains underappreciated. Like the civil rights movement itself, the White countermovement was a shifting network of overlapping alliances and associations over a period of decades rather than a clearly defined hierarchical group. Countermovement figures were southern White elites who recognized the threat to their way of life at an early date, before civil rights struggles entered the national consciousness. Preoccupied with the need to obtain national influence and national alliances, they turned away from racial demagoguery in favor of arguments based on the Constitution and limited government.¹⁹ Seeking to appeal to a broad swath of national White opinion, they continually sought to position themselves as defenders of traditional American principles rather than parochial southern concerns. Finally, they favored long-term strategic thinking to preserve White privilege rather than immediate emotional defiance that might shatter their social system. Taken together, these characteristics constituted a distinct countermovement that presented some of the most serious obstacles to the Black freedom struggle.

As Stennis's career came to an end in 1988, much had changed. Black Americans voted in large numbers and occupied an unprecedented amount of elective offices, while overt discrimination in public places was unanimously deplored. It was easy for Americans to believe that they lived in a society the civil rights movement created. This

¹⁹ This rhetorical shift occurred as early as the 1930s. See Keith M. Finley, *Delaying the Dream: Southern Senators and the Fight against Civil Rights, 1938-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008). For background on the changes that caused southern White elites to fear for their way of life at such an early date, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

was not false, but nor was it the whole story. Successful social movements tend to provoke countermovements that seek to alter or roll back the change that has occurred.²⁰ Though the work of Black activists was the driving force of change during the civil rights era, the varied responses of Whites were influential in shaping the eventual boundaries of that change.²¹ Yet early scholarship on the civil rights movement focused on the work of the movement's supporters and had little time for the subject of White resistance. Those that did address the White response often focused on key media events and figures such as Bloody Sunday at Selma and Bull Connor in Birmingham. The emphasis on extremist and violent figures helped to frame the White response in a narrative of "backlash," a term that implies a visceral and unthinking reaction.²² In reality, as Stennis's career demonstrates, many White southerners engaged in a sophisticated countermovement that was every bit as strategic and thoughtful as the civil rights movement itself. Framing the White response as a countermovement opens up the possibility of treating White resistance as an important object of study in its own right rather than a curiosity with little relevance for today.

²⁰ See Kenneth T. Andrews, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Andrews examines civil rights era Mississippi using insights of sociologists who have studied the dynamics of social movements and social change.

²¹ Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

²² Taylor Branch's monumental trilogy *America in the King Years* is a classic example of traditional civil rights history. It emphasizes the work of religious Black southerners whose White opponents most often make their appearance in the form of violent spasms of resistance well-suited to media spectacle. See especially, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

Just as a “long civil rights movement” has been widely accepted in recent years, it is important to extend the same periodization to the countermovement.²³ As Jason Morgan Ward has argued, “If there was a ‘long civil rights movement,’ there was also a long segregationist countermovement.”²⁴ From the moment Stennis arrived in the Senate, he spoke of a generation-long struggle ahead and laid plans to resist the changes he believed were coming. This occurred well before *Brown v. Board of Education*, a traditional marker for the beginning of the civil rights movement era in popular narratives. Despite the salience of this long White countermovement, at the popular level it has been overshadowed by narratives of a civil rights movement that supposedly swept all before it.²⁵

The theoretical assumptions informing this study draw on the insights of sociologists, scholars of political development, and critical race theorists. I argue that racism and White privilege remain central to the American experience, as they have throughout the history of the United States. For at least half a century most Americans have viewed racism as an exception to American ideals, something anomalous and deviant. In contrast, critical race theory holds that “racism is normal” rather than “aberrant.” But because it is “an ingrained feature of our landscape,” it is often not

²³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1233-1263. The most potent critique of Hall’s view is found in Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *The Journal of African American History* 92 (2007): 265-288.

²⁴ Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 2.

²⁵ Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, “The Struggle over Memory,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford eds., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), xi-xxiv.

recognized as racism.²⁶ This normalization of racism is both produced by and reflected in language, giving rise to what some have called “colorblind racism” or “laissez-faire racism.”²⁷ The world of colorblind racism is marked by persistent and systemic White privilege, but it is normalized and rendered invisible through comparison to the old order of explicit White supremacy. “Sober assessments of how far we have come” are replaced “by congratulatory declarations that we have arrived.”²⁸ Others have called proponents of this dominant racial consensus “racial realists” who are convinced that the primary impediment to racial equality is no longer racism but race-consciousness itself and the accompanying problem of Black grievance.²⁹ In this and other popular racial narratives there remains a persistent tendency to confuse “undeniable accomplishment with the achievement of racial justice itself.”³⁰

Most strains of the modern American consensus on race are united by the complacent conviction that they emerged in direct opposition to the old order of White

²⁶ Richard Delgado, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), xiv.

²⁷ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Lawrence D. Bobo and Ryan A. Smith, “From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism: The Transformation of Racial Attitudes,” in Wendy F. Katkin et al, eds., *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Identities in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). Bonilla-Silva identifies four central “frames” of interpretation that modern Americans—especially Whites—use to understand race: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. Remarkably, all four of these frames are clearly evident in Stennis’s thought, reflecting continuity in Whites’ perception of race even as the racial order shifted from explicit White supremacy to subtle White privilege.

²⁸ Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, “Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back To Move Forward” *Connecticut Law Review*, 43 (2011): 1314.

²⁹ Michael K. Brown et al, *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 5-9.

³⁰ Crenshaw, “Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory,” 1312.

supremacy. This is false. As John Stennis's career demonstrates, the contemporary racial order owes at least as much to the White countermovement as it does to the civil rights movement itself. Stennis and his allies consistently spoke about race and rights in ways that presaged and contributed to the modern consensus. The countermovement took traditionally liberal ideals—the notion of a colorblind Constitution and a nondiscriminatory state—and put a conservative twist on them, demanding that the state unilaterally disarm in the face of socially sanctioned White privilege.³¹ The distinction between racial discrimination and race consciousness in public policy was all but erased. Seen in this light, the influence of Stennis and other segregationists more clearly emerges. For if the modern American racial consensus was one built in opposition to the old racial order, claims of segregationist influence would ring hollow indeed. But if, as I argue, the modern consensus emerged out of rather than in opposition to the old racial order, then what John Stennis represents is quite important. This importance is little recognized, because the old battle for White supremacy shaded so subtly into a rear-guard campaign for White privilege. As prominent critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw argues, “The post-reform trajectory of civil rights discourse has long revealed that modest

³¹ The ideal of a colorblind Constitution had a storied lineage. It was referred to by Justice Harlan in his dissent in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that institutionalized the principle of separate but equal accommodations. Harlan wrote, “Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.” Quoted in William James Hull Hoffer, *Plessy v. Ferguson: Race and Inequality in Jim Crow America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 136. The rhetoric of colorblindness was embraced by Martin Luther King in a series of speeches in the early 1960s, culminating in his famous “Dream” speech at the March on Washington. King’s progressive intent in the use of such language was almost immediately appropriated for conservative purposes by his opponents. See Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

victories are inevitably appropriated as ammunition by those seeking to limit the scope of racial reform.”³²

As Stennis attempted to curb civil rights gains, he acted within a specific ideological context. Calling himself “an old-fashioned conservative Democrat,” Stennis was ideologically predisposed to reach out to northern and western conservatives.³³ But what did conservatism mean to Stennis? As a figure whose career straddled a line between the Deep South and national conservatism, it is important to situate him in an ideological context. He was not a mere opportunist in his fight against civil rights. Stennis was a genuine Jeffersonian who lauded the virtues of small-town agrarian America and possessed a deep aversion to federal encroachment. Though he brought pork home to his state in the form of defense contracts and agricultural subsidies, throughout his career Stennis remained deeply committed to localism, social hierarchy, and organic change. He acted out of sincerely held beliefs that were as ideological as the movement for freedom and equality he resisted.³⁴ There is every reason to believe that these politics were a genuine expression of his view of human nature.

³² Crenshaw, “Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory,” 1316.

³³ Television interview with Longines Chronoscope (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1952), Kent State University Library.

³⁴ Michael Freeden has argued that conservatism is marked by a commitment to organic change, belief in a natural social order originating beyond human will, and a “mirror-image characteristic” in which conservatism’s principles are formed in terms of opposition to a progressive force seeking to create change or restructure the social order. Stennis exhibited all of these characteristics in his rhetoric. See Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory, a Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 333-336.

Yet to omit race from a discussion of Stennis's ideology would render him unintelligible. His commitment to organic change and a natural social order were not distinct from his ideology of White supremacy. They were, rather, expressions of it. Indeed, it was while defending segregation that Stennis frequently cited these conservative principles, revealing how the ideologies of conservatism and White supremacy could blend together in a symbiotic relationship. The integral connections between White supremacy and his broader politics do not turn Stennis into an isolated figure of an exceptional South. As Rogers M. Smith has demonstrated, through much of American history White elites nationwide “pervasively and unapologetically structured U.S. citizenship in terms of illiberal and undemocratic racial...hierarchies.”³⁵ The grouping together of citizenship, conservative politics, and White supremacy was a quintessentially American project rather than a southern one.

As Charles Mills argues, the modern western nation-state was founded as a racial state. Its philosophical underpinnings described an ideal social contract marked by egalitarianism, equality, and individual liberty. In actual practice modern states instituted a “racial contract,” that replaced medieval hierarchies with newly invented modern stratifications based on race.³⁶ Whereas pre-modern states rejected equality as an ideal and were deliberately hierarchical, the modern contract held out the promise of freedom and equality for all citizens—while rendering citizenship intrinsically White. This racial contract was all the more powerful for being so little acknowledged. The reality of the

³⁵ Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1.

³⁶ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

hierarchical racial state was so at odds with the stated ideals of classical liberalism that it existed under a screen of pretense and obfuscation. Mills calls this phenomenon “racial opacity.”³⁷

Racial opacity has been particularly powerful in the United States. America’s founding documents do not make the Whiteness of citizenship explicit and only obliquely acknowledge the existence of racial slavery. Racial opacity remains crucial to the functioning of the modern American state, as systemic White advantage across nearly every measurable dimension of American life is often treated as a lamentable but innocuous fact with little racial or historical content. This helps to explain the success of Stennis and other White supremacists in preventing a truly revolutionary destruction of White privilege. Much of what Stennis stood for, such as individual liberty and freedom, emerged out of a classical liberal tradition in which individual rights were celebrated and defended, but were assumed to possess Whiteness. Stennis benefited from what might be called a philosophical and legal home-field advantage. He was able to defend White democracy in the name of basic and widely shared American values precisely because the two had grown up together.³⁸

Despite the crucial role of White supremacy in the development of the United States, it has often been treated as an exception to American ideals. In Gunnar Myrdal’s

³⁷ Charles Mills, “Liberalism and the Racial State,” in *State of White Supremacy: Racism, Governance, and the United States*, ed. Moon-Kie Jung et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 32-34.

³⁸ Despite the salience of race in American political development, scholars of race and scholars of political development have often functioned in their own respective spheres. For a notable exception to this unfortunate trend, see Joseph Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian T. Warren, eds., *Race and American Political Development* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

groundbreaking book, *An American Dilemma*, the corollary to the South as region apart was the notion that racism itself was an exception to an “American Creed” defined by freedom, equality, justice and opportunity. Deviations from this creed, Myrdal believed, were anomalies cutting against the grain of America’s liberal historical development. He argued that the American Creed was so pervasive that even those who were excluded from its practice spoke of it as a present reality and based their demands for inclusion on it. These demands would one day be met, for “the status accorded the Negro in America represents nothing more and nothing less than a century-long lag of public morals.”³⁹ Justice for Blacks would be achieved when Whites finally lived up to their deepest beliefs. “There is no doubt,” Myrdal wrote, “that the great majority of white people in America would be prepared to give the Negro a substantially better deal if they knew the facts.”⁴⁰

Myrdal’s optimistic approach reflected the predominant White-centric view that change would occur through Whites finally deigning to accept Blacks into American society. Black intellectuals pushed back against this consensus. In *Dusk of Dawn*, W.E.B. Du Bois grappled with American democracy as it was rather than as an ideal. “The democracy which the white world seeks to defend,” Dubois bluntly asserted during the dark days of World War Two, “does not exist. It has been splendidly conceived and

³⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962, originally published 1944), 3-25.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 48.

discussed, but not realized.”⁴¹ Du Bois rejected the persistent tendency to count progressive forces as fully American while arbitrarily discounting the White supremacy that traced a bright color line through American history. It was easy to praise “the philosophy of Jefferson,” the “crusade of Garrison” and “the reason of Sumner,” but these did not outweigh “the race superiority doctrines of Calhoun, the imperialism of Jefferson Davis, nor the race hate of Ben Tillman.”⁴²

Richard Wright put the issue plainly in his autobiography *Black Boy*. “I feel that for white America to understand the significance of the problem of the Negro will take a bigger and tougher America than any we have yet known,” Wright wrote. “America’s past is too shallow, her national character too suffused with color hate for her to accomplish so vast and complex a task.” Wright believed that the exclusion of Blacks was so central to American life that if the United States ever attempted to eradicate White supremacy “it will find itself at war with itself, convulsed by a spasm of emotional and moral confusion.” To truly grapple with the position of Blacks in society would require a fundamental reexamination of “the moral attitude of the nation.”⁴³ James Baldwin agreed. Tracing an arc from the Constitution to Dred Scott to his present day, Baldwin wrote, “there is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro’s situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure.” Yet such changes were so unsettling to White Americans that they were “unable even to envision

⁴¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968, originally published 1940 by Harcourt, Brace & World), 169.

⁴² Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 139.

⁴³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: HarperPerennial 2006, originally published 1944), 272.

them.”⁴⁴ This presented a stark contrast to the optimism of most White writers of the time. Du Bois, Wright, and Baldwin offered a sense of America’s history and meaning in which the destruction of White supremacy might produce a national identity crisis rather than ushering in the inevitable culmination of American ideals.

When John Stennis spoke of racial equality as a fiction and assumed an unspoken “White” qualifier before words like self-government and individual rights, he was not anti-modern or expressing the beliefs of an extremist fringe. He was articulating what had been the predominant understanding of democratic citizenship through most of American history up to that time. Myrdal’s optimism that “The American Creed” would eventually win out implied unanimity of opinion about the contents of that creed that did not exist. The United States was built as a White state populated by White citizens; Stennis’s efforts to keep it as such was a characteristically modern and American project. As Joel Olson has argued, it is worth considering the possibility that “racial oppression and American democracy are mutually constitutive rather than antithetical...”⁴⁵ This provides a useful foundation to explain the success Stennis and other White supremacists had in preserving White privilege even after the explicit link between race and citizenship was severed in the 1960s. The lingering structures and traditions of a racial state made it difficult for ordinary White citizens to contemplate, much less support, a society without racial privilege. The ambiguous state of affairs in the post-civil rights movement era

⁴⁴ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), 115.

⁴⁵ Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv. This view also recalls the classic work of Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

empowered colorblind conservatism, making it a potent vehicle to deny the persistence of the racial state.

This study explores the roots of these developments as seen through the Senate career of John C. Stennis. Chapter one explores Stennis's formative influences in a culture of White supremacy and racial paternalism, and traces his participation in the countermovement from his election to the Senate in 1947 to the presidential election of 1952. During these years Stennis fought the Truman civil rights program as he grappled with the tensions of building a nationally appealing moderate image while maintaining support from militant White Mississippians. Chapter two covers the years 1953 to 1959 as the countermovement prepared for and responded to *Brown* and battled the Civil Rights Act of 1957. During this period, wary of any high-risk actions, Stennis opted for a strategic and malleable form of resistance. The gaps between his public and private rhetoric became particularly pronounced, reflecting the contradictions in his desire to mount a public relations campaign to win over northern Whites while holding down his Deep South flank. Chapter three explores Stennis's key role in the fight against the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, concluding with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. During these years Stennis seemed to suffer one defeat after another, but the distance between segregationists and other conservative forces continued to shrink, and Stennis's long hoped-for alliance began to come into view.

A comment on the language of race and racial titles is necessary. Like Peggy Pascoe and others, I have chosen to capitalize the terms Black and White.⁴⁶ My hope is to always keep before the reader the constructedness of these categories, emphasizing their social and political reality without reducing them to physical descriptions. This allows for examination of this most potent of modern inventions—race—without fully accepting it on modernity’s terms. I also employ the terms White supremacy and White privilege. These terms are preferable to others such as segregation or Jim Crow because they better capture the essential dynamic of these years. While Whites often stressed the need to get along, as the term “race-relations” implies, Black activists insisted a redistribution of power was necessary.

Americans live in a political and social milieu fundamentally shaped by the White countermovement. They talk about rights, race, and citizenship in ways that echo, recall, and affirm the countermovement, but rarely realize they are doing so. They live in a society the countermovement helped to create, but shunt any but the most caricatured memory of it to the side. Studying John Stennis compels us to confront these uncomfortable connections. He is not easily marginalized as a vanquished bigot. He lingers in the historical record, a quiet witness to a story of change and retrenchment that is not as triumphant as Americans often imagine. For me, his most basic relevance is found in the sobering awareness that the patterns and structures of my life frequently

⁴⁶ See Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-14, for her discussion of the construction of racial categories and the conceptual benefits of capitalizing such labels.

reproduce racial privilege rather than weaken it. To see oneself in Stennis is not to diminish his culpability. It is to embrace ours.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This study owes a particular debt to other works that utilize segregationists to explore American society and politics in the second half of the twentieth century. See especially, Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012).

CHAPTER I

Building the Countermovement, 1947-1952

Stennis arrived in the Senate at the end of 1947 to find the assumptions of three-quarters of a century giving way. Traditionally, White southerners had depended on the indifference—and often the outright sympathy—of Whites beyond the South as they set about the messy work of constructing and maintaining states of White supremacy. From business interests in search of cheap labor and raw materials to northern Democrats eyeing the presidency, there was no shortage of rationalizations for giving White southerners a wide berth in settling their “peculiar” problem. If nothing else, the pervasive racism of the North was often reason enough. It was a sectional accommodation that allowed demagogues like the South Carolinian Ben Tillman at the turn of the century to look his colleagues in the eyes on the floor of the Senate and boast of shooting Blacks and stuffing ballot boxes, assured that any self-respecting community of American Whites would do the same if necessary to maintain their power.¹

During the 1930s and 1940s, changes set in motion by depression and world war brought vast economic, social, and demographic upheavals, with new political realities following in their wake. The White countermovement was born out of an emerging

¹ Tillman said, “We took the government away. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it. The Senator from Wisconsin would have done the same thing. I see it in his eye right now. He would have done it.” Quoted in Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 279.

realization that the indifference and sympathy Ben Tillman took for granted could no longer be assumed in the New Deal era. The old agrarian South was withering away as mechanization increased and Black migrants by the millions looked to the urban North in search of opportunity. Black voters made themselves a key constituency for which northern Democrats and Republicans competed. As a result, southern senators found their traditional political alliances strained. It was no longer obvious that their northern colleagues could ignore Black concerns without paying a political price. During World War Two Black Americans waged a “Double V Campaign,” seeking victory against fascism both at home and abroad, while the March on Washington Movement demanded and won more fairness in federal employment practices. These movements contributed to changing social norms. Having fought a global war against racist fascism, Americans became increasingly uncomfortable with displays of overt racism in public life. Acutely aware of these trends, by the 1940s White southern elites feared the most sustained challenge to their way of life since Reconstruction was just over the horizon.²

As Black veterans of World War Two returned to their communities, they asserted their rights with new boldness, providing a nucleus around which renewed activism could take place.³ White southerners responded with several high profile cases

² Finley, *Delaying the Dream*, 3-14. For more on the March on Washington Movement and the rise of Black activism prior to World War Two, see Cornelius L. Bynum, A. *Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). On the Double V Campaign, see Kimberley L. Phillips, *War! What is it Good For? : Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

³ See Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

of violence, intimidation, and lynching in a desperate effort to roll back the palpable change in climate the War had wrought. In December of 1946, President Harry Truman, declaring that “all parts of our population are not equally free from fear,” signed an executive order establishing a committee on civil rights to make recommendations to secure the freedoms of all Americans.⁴ The following July, the House of Representatives easily passed an anti-poll tax bill for the fourth time in five years.⁵ Just weeks before Stennis’s election, the President’s committee issued a sweeping report calling for legislation against lynching, poll taxes, and segregation in the military. On some of the more intractable problems the report stopped short of recommending federal legislation and urged action at the state level instead.⁶ Despite these concessions to states’ prerogatives, the report was easily the most far-reaching set of proposals publicly considered by any administration up to that time.⁷

In response to these challenges, the countermovement dug in, cast about for new allies, and prepared for a generations-long battle ahead. The task was formidable. In a rapidly changing country, with social norms evolving and political power being redistributed, White southerners searched for the means to preserve their way of life. As

⁴ John D. Morris, “Truman Creates Civil Rights Board,” *New York Times*, 6 December 1946, 25.

⁵ “House Passes Poll Tax Ban,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 21 July 1947, 1; William S. White, “Anti-Poll Tax Bill Adopted in House by Vote of 290-112,” *New York Times*, 22 July 1947, 1.

⁶ *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947).

⁷ For background on the role of the Truman administration in the overlooked civil rights struggle before *Brown v. Board of Education*, see Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002); Raymond H. Geselbracht, editor, *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2007).

Stennis's work during these years indicates, many pinned their hopes on a "northern strategy" featuring public relations campaigns and careful rhetoric about rights and the Constitution designed to appeal to Whites beyond the South.⁸ Stennis grappled with the tension between strategies that might win national influence and the respect of his Senate colleagues as opposed to those that would likely play well in his home state. His desire to take a constructive part in a countermovement to win northern support was consistently undercut by his association with Mississippi, a state with a hard-earned reputation as the epicenter of racial oppression. The result was a delicate balancing act from a skilled politician. A gulf emerged between his public rhetoric and private remarks as he assured White constituents of his agreement with their racial paternalism while portraying himself publicly as a defender of the Constitution for all Americans. In doing so, Stennis became an early adopter of political and racial discourses that would dominate American politics for the rest of the twentieth century.

Joining the Countermovement

The election of John C. Stennis was said to herald a new day for Mississippi. He could hardly have been more different than the former occupant of the office. The notorious Theodore Bilbo was not even seated at the time of his death as the Senate investigated his inflammatory rhetoric urging violence against Black voters.⁹ Where

⁸ See Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, 6-7. The familiarity of the "southern strategy" thesis of later decades renders the use of the term "northern strategy" particularly provocative. Rather than merely being acted upon by outside political forces, White southerners were themselves seeking to influence the rest of the nation. It emphasizes that the efforts of White southern elites were purposeful, strategic, long-term and, ultimately, not without success.

⁹ "Bilbo Dies," *Hattiesburg American*, 21 August 1947, 1.

Bilbo was mercurial and demagogic, Stennis was reserved and dignified. The *New York Times* exulted that the election of Stennis sent a clear message that “The wave of prejudice and bigotry” on which figures like Bilbo depended was “plainly ebbing at its source.”¹⁰ Mississippi’s Hodding Carter, Pulitzer Prize winning editor of the moderate *Delta Democrat-Times*, basked in his endorsement of the winning candidate as “the only one whose appeal was not based upon hate or retaliation or fear.”¹¹ Even the Associated Negro Press allowed that Stennis ran “a decent campaign.”¹² It was widely reported that he refused to seek electoral advantage by resorting to divisive racial rhetoric. When asked why, Stennis simply said, “I asked my father what I should say about the race problem. He said ‘nothing’...and that is what I am doing.”¹³

There was little question that Stennis was more measured in his rhetoric than some of his opponents, but the contest for racial moderation was far from robust. He faced the long-time congressman John Rankin, whose racial demagoguery made him the House of Representatives answer to Bilbo. Another opponent, Bilbo’s former attorney Forrest Jackson, railed against “mixed-breed” organizations coming to Mississippi “to see that negroes are allowed to vote” and criticized Stennis for acting as if “the best way to handle the racial issue is to ignore it.”¹⁴ While these men explicitly invoked the peril of

¹⁰ “Mississippi Election,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1947, 26.

¹¹ “A Good Day for Mississippi,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 5 November 1947, 1.

¹² “Mound Bayou Votes John Rankin a Blank,” *The Plain Dealer*, 14 November 1947, 7.

¹³ “Stennis Takes Winning Lead in Race,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 5 November 1947, 1.

¹⁴ “Jackson, Stennis Talk at Columbia and Holly Springs,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 16 October 1947, 11; “Senate Race,” *Hattiesburg American*, 1 November 1947, 9; “Bilbo’s Attorney Seeks Former Client’s Seat;

Black voters and sought to claim Bilbo's mantle, Stennis largely ignored them and focused on his agricultural credentials and personal character. He was the candidate of economic growth and agricultural development, underscored by his upbringing in rural Kemper County. He called for federal funding to aid the common farmer with an extensive rural road network and pledged to fight for lower taxes and better schools.¹⁵

Yet the notion that Stennis won by being silent on race was not strictly true. While he avoided demagoguery, he left White Mississippians with no doubt about where he stood. In a campaign speech at Meridian, he pledged to oppose every aspect of the Truman civil rights program, as all "red-blooded Southerners" would.¹⁶ The following month Stennis promised that under his watch "the Southern Way of Life" would continue.¹⁷ In the waning days of the campaign he ran a newspaper advertisement assuring White Mississippians that "Judge Stennis is inherently opposed to outside interference in Mississippi's affairs, and will be vigilant in his defense of our concept of state's rights."¹⁸ These rhetorical appeals were dramatically less explosive than those Bilbo employed in his winning campaign a year earlier, but they remained full of racial

Rankin to be Candidate," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 28 August 1947, 1. Wherever possible, I quote racial titles as they appeared in primary sources. Thus "Negro" is often uncapitalized, reflecting the common usage of Mississippi Whites.

¹⁵ "Why...Stennis Will Be Senator," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 22 October 1947, 6; "Stennis Promises Fight for Roads," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 4 October 1947, 1.

¹⁶ Meridian Campaign Speech, 17 September 1947, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 1, JCS.

¹⁷ "Stennis Pledges Himself to Serve 'The People,'" *Hattiesburg American*, 17 October 1947, 12.

¹⁸ "Judge John Stennis for United States Senator," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 17 October 1947, 12.

content, effectively assuring White Mississippians that they were voting for a change in style rather than substance.

Noting Stennis's quiet assurances that White supremacy would be defended, some wondered if much had really changed in Mississippi, even as they celebrated the election of a more statesmanlike figure.¹⁹ Indeed, Stennis's refusal to discuss "the race problem" signaled a tacit agreement with a status quo of pervasive political, social, and economic oppression. After all, Stennis sought the votes of an electorate that was over 99% White due to the systematic disenfranchisement of Black voters.²⁰ Schools and other public facilities made a mockery of the pretense of "separate but equal." Even as tens of thousands of Blacks migrated out of the state during the 1940s, hundreds of thousands more remained mired in work as sharecroppers and domestics that left them on the edge of subsistence. Amid these inequities, a pervasive potential for violence was never far from the surface. During the 1930s, Mississippi alone accounted for nearly 40% of the lynchings in the United States.²¹ It was in this context that Stennis said "nothing" and was praised for it by White moderates.

Stennis's reticence on race signaled a recommitment to White supremacy in new forms rather than a retreat from it. It indicated that some White Mississippians were ready to participate in the countermovement as productive partners rather than playing the role of the embarrassing emblem of all that was wrong with the South. Yet for those

¹⁹ "How Conservative is Mississippi?" *Anniston Star*, 23 November 1947, 4.

²⁰ Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 253-254.

²¹ Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 22.

willing to look carefully, there was ample evidence that Stennis's brand of racial politics was the same old wine in new wineskins. During the campaign he described the institutions of local governance as the foundation of American political life. "The Town and City Government, the County and State Government, and other local units are vital to Democracy," Stennis said, "for they give every citizen a part to play and they solve local, county and state problems."²² In the Deep South, where Blacks were systematically denied the vote and excluded from these "vital" institutions, the implication was clear: citizenship itself was White. Yet Stennis's simple refusal to play the demagogue on race won him fawning portrayals in national media and the incalculable advantage of arriving in Washington with the reputation of a man of decency and moderation. This demonstrated the potential of carefully modulated rhetoric in a country in which many Whites' sensitivities were activated more by outlandish rhetoric and spasms of conspicuous violence than by the quiet daily work of racial oppression. It was a lesson Stennis would not soon forget.

Shortly after his arrival in Washington, in a speech to the Conference of Mississippi Democrats, Stennis discussed these threats and the strategies White southerners should pursue to meet them. He took note of the increase in Black activism during the 1940s, warning of the danger of "organized pressure groups" that were "designed to destroy our way of life." But it was not only the White southern way of life they threatened. Their legislative program, Stennis charged, would "Federalize the entire Nation and sweep away the last remaining vestige of the States' rights and also of

²² Meridian Campaign Speech, 17 September 1947, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 1, JCS.

personal freedom.” The very graveness of this threat might provide the White South’s deliverance, because it created an opportunity for “an appeal that can be made nationwide.” The task was to awaken the people of the North and West by making the danger real to them and explaining the cause for which White southerners were really fighting. From Stennis’s perspective, they fought not for a provincial and southernized White supremacy, but for fundamental values that all Americans shared.²³

For nearly 200 years America had thrived by championing the primacy of local governance. This, Stennis said, was not a southern principle but an American one. He argued that Whites beyond the South did not realize their liberties were so severely threatened. The “pressure groups” had duped the American people into thinking the civil rights agenda was a moral matter when in fact it was a “practical problem” that could only be solved gradually and by localized means. Embedded in this speech were assumptions not so different from those Ben Tillman blithely shared on the floor of the Senate half a century earlier. Stennis believed that White Americans of all regions had much more in common than they knew. The social arrangements in Mississippi were merely the natural outcome of American principles put into practice in the state with the highest Black population in the Union. Somehow, White Americans beyond the South had to be made to see this. In the meantime, White Mississippians needed to “prepare our ‘machinery’ and pool our resources” for the long battle to come.²⁴

²³ Speech to Conference of Mississippi Democrats, 12 February 1948, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 2, JCS.

²⁴ Ibid.

Stennis concluded his remarks with a call for racial paternalism that was, in its bluntness, more revealing than his speeches intended for national audiences. “It is the duty and responsibility of the white people right here in the south,” Stennis told his listeners, “to exercise our influence and leadership over these colored people.” Substantial progress had already been made in “teaching the colored race a means of self-expression and suitable vocational training.” The task at hand was to continue this “wonderful influence” in the face of increased activism by the “pressure groups.”²⁵ As this blending of themes in the same speech indicates, Stennis’s limited government conservatism and racial paternalism were of the same piece. They were irretrievably bound together in ways that defy easy separation or categorization. Nevertheless, at an early date Stennis recognized that certain kinds of overt racial appeals were counterproductive when speaking to a national audience. As a result, he often attempted to downplay his racial paternalism even as it profoundly shaped his politics.

The Racial Paternalist

Stennis’s career cannot be understood apart from his deeply felt ties to the Old South and the racial paternalism those ties instilled. Born in 1901 in rural and majority Black Kemper County, he was the descendent of a proud slave-owning family that had arrived in the region generations before.²⁶ Many family members fought in the Civil War. His uncle, John Dudley Stennis, was killed during the charge in the peach orchard at

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ In a state with a reputation for racial violence, Stennis’s county stood out. It was known by some as “Bloody Kemper.” See Richard C. Cortner, *A “Scottsboro” Case in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 4.

Gettysburg.²⁷ Stennis was proud of his heritage and went to great lengths to track down the precise dates of events and the nature of his family's activities. He recalled learning about Reconstruction on his father's knee. In a speech at Natchez, he quoted the words of his grandmother, the wife of the Governor of Mississippi, whose privileged status was upended shortly after the Civil War: "Dressed in my plain black silk, leaving all our family possessions behind, I marched out of the Governor's Mansion between rows of negro soldiers armed with fixed bayonets. Ignoring them, I looked neither to the right nor to the left but entered my carriage...with a face as stern as death..."²⁸

For Stennis and his audience this tale evoked the horror of what seemed to be a society turned upside down. Yet it also suggested the unshakeable dignity and strength of the southern White woman. "She, whose forbears had helped create the state, would never let the carpetbag hoodlums know *her* true feelings," Stennis boasted. "Yes, our state went through some mighty black days during Reconstruction..."²⁹ The dual function of the word "black" offered a telling reminder of the assumptions Stennis would bring to the coming battles over civil rights. He and many other White southerners did not think of the twentieth century civil rights agenda as an untested proposition. In their view, Black empowerment had been tried before, and it had been a disaster. The opponents of White supremacy were worse than naïve; they refused to acknowledge the lessons of history and insisted on returning the South to its darkest and most shameful era.

²⁷ Family History, Series 46, Box 24, Folders 2, 9 and 17, JCS.

²⁸ Speech to the National Council of Garden Clubs, Natchez, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 49, JCS.

²⁹ Ibid.

Stennis's view of Reconstruction was shaped not only by his family life and upbringing, but by the academic environment of early to mid-twentieth century America. When a constituent wrote to Stennis to recommend that he read the book, *Kemper County Vindicated*, Stennis replied that he had his own copy and had read it several times.³⁰ Published in 1879, it was a sensationalist tale of how Stennis's home county was nearly destroyed by "radical rule" before it was delivered by White southern patriots. Filled with descriptions of the "ignorant African" and "brutal negro," the book voiced two key assumptions that would become embedded in Stennis's thought: Blacks must inevitably be led by Southern Whites if they were to avoid self-destruction, and racial equality was not merely distasteful but unnatural. Reconstruction was a calamity because it failed to acknowledge these two truths.³¹ If less baldly stated, the basic outlines of this view had the approval of academic historians nationwide in the early part of the twentieth century, notably the Dunning School at Columbia University.³² The astonishing success of D.W. Griffith's groundbreaking film *Birth of a Nation* demonstrated the pervasive appeal of

³⁰ John C. Stennis to Henry Foster, 17 January 1949, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 20, JCS; James D. Lynch, *Kemper County Vindicated, and a Peep at Radical Rule in Mississippi* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), originally published 1879.

³¹ Stennis was not, however, a scientific racist. He remained agnostic at best about notions of biological inferiority, but was deeply convinced of what he considered to be the cultural chasm between Black and White southerners.

³² Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Perennial, 1988), 609. Stennis's thinking was also shaped by his reading of *The Tragic Era* by Claude G. Bowers. Published in 1929, the book portrayed Reconstruction as an unjust imposition on the White South by corrupt and power-lusting northerners. It was popular among Whites nationwide. *Congressional Record*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 3 March 1960, 4289. Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1929). See Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 90, 122.

these views in popular culture, as a powerful impulse toward sectional reconciliation made Black rights expendable.³³

If the memory of Reconstruction gave Stennis and other White southerners a unique prism of fear through which they interpreted the civil rights movement, it also provided hope. For the denouement of Reconstruction was marked by northern retreat and the violent reassertion of White Democratic control. In a similar fashion, the excesses of the civil rights movement would run their course and White southerners would be left to pick up the pieces. This thinking tapped into Stennis's blend of sectional and national patriotism in which the White South represented all that was best about America and was its purest defender. In a speech to the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1948, Stennis shared his treasured memories of Confederate veteran reunions where "my first sense of patriotism was aroused." In the Civil War, "the South came to its highest expression in patriotism when it produced the Confederate soldier," who was animated by "a high plane of patriotism" and "did not count the cost nor expect a material reward."³⁴ If this sounded nearly biblical in its grandiosity, it was not the last time Stennis would appropriate the language of his Christian faith to describe the White South's cause.

In a 1956 speech for the dedication of Jefferson Davis Memorial Park in Virginia, Stennis likened the travails of the Confederate President, and by extension the entire White South, to those of Christ. Davis's imprisonment "was as a cup of vinegar held up

³³ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001).

³⁴ Speech to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, 5 June 1948, Series 49, Box 1 Folder 2, JCS.

to the crucified and dying South,” Stennis declared, “but even the rigors of this Gethsemane never daunted the spirit of Jefferson Davis.” White southerners were not fighting for any base or material thing, much less slavery. Rather, they sought to protect “a principle as old as the hills and as sacred as the covenants of all god-fearing peoples. They were fighting for autonomy and local self-government, something that men call ‘freedom.’” The Civil War was merely “a single engagement” in the ongoing battle for liberty and “self-determination.”³⁵ By embracing these views of the Civil War, Stennis at once reinforced his conservatism concerning the proper role of government and devalued Black life, for the high-minded principles he invoked did not apply to a full third of the Civil War era southern population: Black slaves.³⁶

The tendency to write Blacks out of the story of self-government and individual rights became persistent in Stennis’s thought. He denied doing any such thing. In his view, Blacks were a key part of the picture provided they remained in their proper place as happy apprentices, eager to be trained and uplifted by the more advanced White race. This was epitomized by a book called *The Cult of Equality*, published in 1945, that Stennis read and remarked favorably upon.³⁷ The book warned that treating racial equality as a fact would result in “amalgamation” and the destruction of freedom. It

³⁵ Speech to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, 5 May 1956, Series 49, Box 3, Folder 3, JCS.

³⁶ A similar point can be made of another third of the Civil War era southern population: White women. But (it was thought) southern women had a stake in the nation and partook of the promises of the Declaration of Independence by association with their husbands and fathers. In contrast, slaves were outside the polity entirely. As Jefferson Davis said, “the great principles” declared in America’s founding documents “have no reference to the slave.” It is not unreasonable to see vestiges of this view in Stennis’s thought. See Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 14.

³⁷ John C. Stennis to John F. Frierson, 8 September 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 37, JCS.

argued that under American democracy Blacks had more freedom than anywhere else and should thus be grateful for everything benevolent Whites had done for them.³⁸ It was not literally the case that Blacks received a degree of freedom and opportunity equal to Whites. But in Stennis's mind this did not constitute discrimination because they received opportunity more than commensurate with their cultural development. He believed imposing equality in law that did not exist in fact was wasteful and counterproductive. Blacks needed leadership to gradually develop, and only southern Whites had the familiarity and sympathy, born of generations of mutual coexistence, to lead them appropriately.

The outlines of Stennis's paternalist beliefs are more clearly visible in light of these influences. In a very different media age, he was able to speak forthrightly on these topics in low-profile public appearances in Mississippi with the knowledge that his remarks were unlikely to be reported in the national press. In a 1948 speech in Cleveland, Mississippi, Stennis asserted that White southerners should be proud of their guidance of "black races who were brought out of the darkest continent as the most primitive and backwards people in the world and, under the U.S. Constitution, have, in the brief span of a few generations, been given more opportunities for progress than any race in the world."³⁹ There is nothing remarkable about a White man of John Stennis's generation and place possessing these views. What is notable, however, is that according to popular

³⁸ Stuart Omer Landry, *The Cult of Equality: A Study of the Race Problem* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1945), 1-20.

³⁹ "South Must Form Program of Action on Own Problems, Sen. Stennis Says," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 15 October 1948, 1.

narratives of American innocence and southern culpability in the second half of the twentieth century, such men were not supposed to become respected figures capable of wielding national power. Stennis would defy these narratives.

He did so while fighting for the world he knew so well: a rural idyll where folks did not lock their doors, everyone knew everybody else, and there could be no doubt about who was in charge. It was a world of clearly established roles and hierarchies, where “good Negroes” had White men to vouch for them and “bad Negroes” were independent. It was a place where Whites were conditioned to expect exaggerated displays of affection and deference from Blacks, contributing to the sense that they were “our Negroes.”⁴⁰ It is impossible to quantify all the ways in which these deep-seated assumptions and life experiences influenced Stennis. But they emerged over the years on the floor of the Senate itself, as he confidently spoke of “happy Negroes” who enjoyed their life in Mississippi. Yet in private Stennis acknowledged the coercive nature of White supremacy. The apparent contradiction between public claims of “happy Negroes” and private admissions of the need for coercion did not mean Stennis’s paternalism was merely a facade. Though on some level he must have known Blacks in Mississippi wore masks to appease their oppressors, the urge to accept the masks at face value proved irresistible.⁴¹ It was a comforting fiction that allowed the ugly work of oppression to go on with minimal emotional distress to its perpetrators. Moreover, from Stennis’s

⁴⁰ James C. Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

⁴¹ For more on the extent to which southern Whites believed their own rhetoric, see David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State university Press, 1990), 3-5.

perspective, coercion was the inevitable and necessary means of navigating the cultural chasm between advanced Whites and backward Blacks. It was not so much a question of whether coercion would occur, but who would do it. Better it be done by southern Whites who knew and understood Blacks the best than by outsiders pushing false notions of immediate equality.

If Stennis cared to listen, there was ample evidence that Blacks in Mississippi were not as happy as he claimed. They were emigrating out of the state in massive numbers, their individual voices giving stark testament to how Stennis's world looked from the other side of the color line. There was the bluesman Furry Lewis, born in the Delta a year before Stennis, whose cold anger rebuked the Senator's complacency:

*I believe I'll buy me a graveyard of my own.
I believe I'll buy me a graveyard of my own.
I'm goin' kill everybody that have done me wrong.*⁴²

There was the tired resignation of civil rights activist Anne Moody's mother: "Negroes are going to have troubles until they're dead, and after you are dead we'll still have the same problems."⁴³ There was the pervasive sense of unease that came from living beyond the protections of the law. Of his childhood in Mississippi Richard Wright wrote of the "dread of white people" that lodged "permanently in my feelings and imagination" and would not let go. He recalled the contortions of personality necessary merely to enable

⁴² Quoted in Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 456.

⁴³ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Delta, 2004), 345. Originally published 1968.

him to “limp through days lived under the threat of violence.”⁴⁴ This was the other side—the necessary corollary—of the idyllic world in which John Stennis came of age.

Fighting Civil Rights in the Year of Revolt: Pressures from Home and the Imperatives of National Influence

As Stennis began his senatorial work in earnest early in 1948, he quickly learned to suppress the roughest edges of the paternalist ethos in which he had been immersed for decades. Yet he had barely arrived in Washington before he faced new questions from back home about his commitment to the cause. After Mississippi Governor Fielding Wright’s inaugural address threatened a break with the national Democratic Party, the state’s senior Senator, James Eastland, offered a statement of unequivocal support. In embarrassing contrast, Stennis was reported as saying he was “still a freshman” and had no comment.⁴⁵ To many Mississippi Whites this looked mealy-mouthed at best. A friend wrote to inform him that his statement was being “questioned plenty” by his supporters and had left them “quite disillusioned.” Others encouraged him to be more like the late Senator he replaced. “We know that you are a gentleman,” wrote a banker in Jackson, “but a man does not have to lose his gentlemanly qualities to stand up for his convictions in a manner to be reckoned with. At times, it will seem to approach vulgarity.” Another man urged, “Mississippi did not like the *way* Bilbo fought the racial equality crowd. But every man, woman, and child down here appreciated his motives, as well as the intensity of his struggle.” For his part, Stennis claimed the “no comment” controversy was much

⁴⁴ Wright, *Black Boy*, 73-74.

⁴⁵ “Gov. Wright Fully Endorsed,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 24 January 1948, 4.

ado about nothing, as he had merely told a reporter he would not comment on the Governor's speech until he had read it.⁴⁶

The minor uproar Stennis's reported remark created was a pointed warning that he had yet to prove himself to his White constituents and would be judged by the steadfastness with which he defended White supremacy. Forced on the defensive, Stennis attempted to explain his strategy to friends and key political figures in the state. He was careful to reassure them that he agreed with their stand on White supremacy and was devoting more time and effort to the cause than to any other issue. Then, gently, Stennis reminded his supporters that what worked in Mississippi did not always go over so well in Washington.⁴⁷ The task at hand was to secure the backing of conservative senators from beyond the South so that Senate leaders could not break a filibuster.⁴⁸ Anything that did not help to win over these senators was counterproductive. "Personal reasoning with the men who are going to pass on these matters" was more effective, though less visible to his constituents back home, than "issuing a lot of statements to the press." Acutely aware of Mississippi's questionable reputation, Stennis explained that he was trying to

⁴⁶ A.E. Branch to John C. Stennis, 23 January 1948; C.B. Price to John C. Stennis, 21 January 1948, Ben Own to John C. Stennis, 23 January 1948; John C. Stennis to A.E. Branch, 24 January 1948; all in Series 29, Box 1, Folder 1, JCS.

⁴⁷ John C. Stennis to C.C. Campbell, 28 February 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 5, JCS.

⁴⁸ Of particular importance was the southern caucus's ad hoc alliance with conservative Republicans in the North and West. Many of these Republican senators were skeptical of federal power and put racial matters low on their list of priorities, making them ready allies for the White South. The unanswered question was how long this marriage of convenience could be sustained as racial issues increasingly moved to the front of the national agenda. For background on GOP senators' thinking in 1948, see Michael Bowen, *The Roots of Modern Conservatism: Dewey, Taft, and the Battle for the Soul of the Republican Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 45-49.

conduct himself “so that what I do say” about civil rights “will be taken seriously and will be respected.”⁴⁹

Amid these pressures, the stakes intensified when President Truman officially presented a ten point civil rights program to Congress in the beginning of February.⁵⁰ Acting on many of the recommendations of the President’s Committee, it sought to abolish the poll tax and make lynching a federal crime. It called for the creation of a permanent civil rights commission, and a civil rights division within the Justice Department. Truman also urged the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission and the end of all discrimination in interstate transportation.⁵¹ This was an unprecedented civil rights agenda, and there is evidence it was far ahead of public opinion, even in the North. A March Gallup Poll found that only 6% of Americans favored passage of the entire program and nearly a third had not even heard of it.⁵² Here, perhaps, were signs of ambivalence among Whites beyond the South that Stennis could capitalize upon. The outcome would be decided in the Senate, where the program’s

⁴⁹ John C. Stennis to A.E. Branch, 24 January 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 1, JCS.

⁵⁰ Anthony Leviero, “Anti-Lynching Law, Civil Liberties Unit Sought by Truman,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1948, 1.

⁵¹ Leviero, “Anti-Lynching Law, Civil Liberties Unit Sought by Truman,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1948, 1.

⁵² George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971, Volume One 1935-1948* (New York: Random House, 1972), 722-723. Polls of this era were considerably less methodologically rigorous than modern surveys. Polls often undersampled Black and poor respondents, for example, which may be reflected in the surprisingly small 6% figure in this poll. Despite these problems, such polling offers suggestive evidence of the broad contours of public opinion. See Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

supporters would have to accomplish something that had never been done before: the defeat of a southern civil rights filibuster.

Constituents urged Stennis to stand strong, and do so publicly. “The people of Mississippi expect and want you to give them hell,” wrote a business owner, “and they want to read about it in the papers.” Trying to explain the need to appeal to a national audience, Stennis replied, “We have had ten years of hell-raising, and the South is definitely worse off because of it.” He sought political cover from his more experienced colleagues, claiming that Mississippi’s senior Senator James Eastland agreed with his approach. The veterans had encouraged him, he said, not to “pop off” and ruin his potential for influence in the Senate. Stennis also revealed that “virtually every Senator” had complimented him on his moderate senatorial campaign. “Friendship and calm persuasion” with his fellow senators in the corridors of power was not flashy, but it was the key to maintaining White southerners’ position in the long run. In an implicit rebuke of Bilbo’s demagoguery, Stennis said, “They just laugh here about such statements” and “too many of them can quickly get a fellow where he is not listened to at all.”⁵³ Stennis was determined to be the kind of senator to whom people listened.

Yet the overwhelming preponderance of his mail made clear that Stennis’s attempt to reach out beyond the South was a political liability for him in Mississippi in early 1948. He received letters suffused with violent sentiment and hysterical warnings

⁵³ James A. McGraw to John C. Stennis, 3 February 1948; John C. Stennis to James A. McGraw, 9 February 1948, both in Series 29, Box 1, Folder 2, JCS.

about rape and “Negro and jew rule and domination.”⁵⁴ Stennis invariably answered these letters with a friendly stock reply assuring the writers that he agreed with the general sentiments expressed. In contrast, when a Kentucky man mildly suggested that perhaps an anti-lynching bill would not be such a bad idea after all, Stennis rudely argued that the man did not “understand” the issues involved and reminded him that “It is up to you to enforce your local laws; otherwise you are going to lose many of your freedoms, regardless of race.”⁵⁵ In the political climate of Mississippi in 1948, Stennis could not afford even the appearance of agreement with civil rights supporters, nor disagreement with White supremacists, however hateful their letters might be.

On 12 February, thousands of Mississippi Democrats gathered in Jackson to respond to Truman’s civil rights program. Stennis rushed back from Washington for the event after a friend warned him of “considerable unfavorable speculation...as to your position.”⁵⁶ The assembly adopted a resolution that threatened to use Mississippi’s electoral votes against the national Democratic ticket in the presidential election and called for a nationwide gathering of “all true white Jeffersonian Democrats” to determine the best course of resistance.⁵⁷ Stennis addressed the crowd in an attempt to clarify his position and tamp down the disillusionment some felt toward their new Senator. Yet he remained cautious, urging White Mississippians to fight against civil rights from within

⁵⁴ A.S. Coody to John C. Stennis, 4 February 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 12, JCS; Enoch R. Whitefield to John C. Stennis, 7 March 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁵⁵ 23 February 1948, Series 29, Box 3, Folder 22, JCS.

⁵⁶ Telegram to John C. Stennis, 10 February 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 5, JCS.

⁵⁷ Clinton C. Blackwell, “State Dems Plan to Fight,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 13 February 1948, 1.

the Democratic fold and only to contemplate a rupture with the national party as a last resort.⁵⁸ He was walking a tightrope. The construction of a national countermovement required a moderate image, but the imperatives of Mississippi politics demanded keeping militant Whites content with the representation he gave them.

Though a freshman Senator, Stennis had an important role to play in clogging the gears of the Senate. He was the lone southerner sitting on the Committee on Rules and Administration, which was considering the poll tax bill. After a subcommittee perfunctorily reported the bill and recommended its passage, Stennis objected to what he claimed was a lack of due diligence and successfully induced the committee to set aside four days for hearings, despite the subject having been “thoroughly exhausted” in numerous hearings held in previous years. The hearings changed no one’s mind; the Rules Committee still favorably reported the bill to the full Senate, with Stennis’s lone dissent.⁵⁹ But every delay in getting a bill to the floor was a win for the southern caucus as they attempted to wind down the clock in an election year. As the legislative battles raged through the winter and Stennis prepared to make his first speech on the floor of the Senate, the political winds blowing against him were clear. His state had become a symbol of the problems Truman’s proposals sought to mitigate. When southern congressman pressured Truman to relent on civil rights, he cited Mississippi as a cause of his determination: “My very stomach turned over when I learned that Negro soldiers, just

⁵⁸ “Stennis Cautions Mississippians Against Democratic Party Break,” *Hattiesburg American*, 12 February 1948, 1.

⁵⁹ “Report to accompany H.R. 29, together with the individual views of Mr. Stennis,” Report No. 1225, Committee on Rules and Administration, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., 30 April 1948.

back from overseas, were being dumped out of army trucks in Mississippi and beaten.”⁶⁰ Stennis knew that such perceptions were devastating to the countermovement’s cause, and he worked to change them.

On 4 March 1948, he rose on the floor of the Senate to give his maiden speech. It was immediately clear that he was no Bilbo. Titled “Dismantling the Constitution,” Stennis’s speech attacked Truman’s proposals on constitutional grounds rather than resorting to racial demagoguery. The recent resurgence of interest in the tenth amendment and original intent in modern American politics is not a new phenomenon, for these were the lynchpins of Stennis’s constitutional interpretations over sixty years ago.⁶¹ He criticized the notion that “the Constitution must be interpreted to meet the times and conditions of a living age” instead of being read strictly according to the founders’ intent. He argued that the long-term consequences of treating the Constitution as a living document would be devastating. Empowered by a flippant attitude toward this sacred text, the “pressure groups” would “gradually liquidate and totally blot out the great American principle of local self-government.” It was thus imperative that Americans rediscover the “neglected” tenth amendment that placed strict boundaries on federal power, thereby preserving freedom and local governance.⁶²

⁶⁰ Quoted in David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 588.

⁶¹ For examples of contemporary interest in these ideas, see for example Kirk Johnson, “States’ Rights Is Rallying Cry for Lawmakers,” *New York Times*, 16 March 2010; Adam Liptak, “Tea-ing Up the Constitution,” *New York Times*, 13 March, 2010.

⁶² *CR*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 4 March 1948, 2102.

Stennis argued that these principles had to be brought to bear on Truman's civil rights program. An anti-lynching law, so sensible on the surface, was actually the first step toward confining "State criminal law in a Federal strait-jacket," taking away powers reserved to the states by the tenth amendment. Likewise, opposition to poll taxes appeared reasonable, but the Constitution gave Congress no power to determine voter qualifications. Banning the poll tax through a mere act of Congress rather than a constitutional amendment would establish a precedent leading to total federal control over all elections. This would allow a political party holding the Presidency and both houses of Congress to tinker with the electoral process to ensure their grip on power in perpetuity. Stennis concluded his remarks with the principle that would be his guiding light throughout his career. In its unimpeachably conservative rhetoric it would be as at home in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth:

Instead of afflicting the people of our great land with more and more bureaus and a greatly extended police power that will pry more and more into the political and private and personal affairs of our people, all operating from a centralized government at Washington, let us start putting the Government back where it belongs—let us put it back in the county courthouses—back in the hands of the people. That may not be the most efficient form of government, but it is the best.⁶³

The use of this widely palatable conservative rhetoric reinforced Stennis's essential claim: the civil rights proposals were a threat to all freedom-loving Americans, not just White southerners. He positioned himself not as a protector of sordid sectional interests but as the defender of every American. In blocking the civil rights bills, "we shall be serving not one area of our Nation but all areas, not just one group, but all groups." Once

⁶³ *CR*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 4 March 1948, 2105.

White southerners' side of the argument was fully aired Americans "will realize that it is a battle for the people of the entire nation."⁶⁴

These arguments were effective because they could appeal to senators in the North and West who shared much of Stennis's conservative perspective on governance, if not his racial priorities. It was rhetoric that allowed Stennis to plausibly claim that others could make common cause with him without necessarily joining in racial oppression. If nothing else, even those who disagreed with him could appreciate his moderation compared to his predecessor. Senator Smith of New Jersey praised Stennis for his "temperate and thoughtful" remarks, and Stennis's speech was reprinted in *Vital Speeches of the Day*.⁶⁵ Not only was his performance well received by his fellow senators, the reaction back in Mississippi was largely positive. The editor of Stennis's hometown newspaper praised him for his "masterpiece" and thanked God "for one man in high public office that can and did speak sensibly on the subject without calling anybody a nigger lover."⁶⁶

Whether from personal conviction or the need to placate White Mississippians, Stennis included other themes in his speech that were less helpful to his efforts to win national support. While professing to respect the sincerity of his opponents, he maligned their motives by arguing that their effort was "a political fraud" perpetrated by elites in both parties to win the northern Black vote in the upcoming election. This appeared to be

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2103.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2106; John C. Stennis, "Dismantling the Constitution" *Vital Speeches of the Day* 14 (1948): 405-409.

⁶⁶ Lamar Sledge to John C. Stennis, 15 March 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 9, JCS.

a sincere belief. In private he wrote to a friend that his fellow senators admitted that the civil rights program was “unadulterated political trickery cooked up and designed to gather in Northern votes.”⁶⁷ He seemed genuinely baffled by politicians who were “willing to scuttle the fundamentals of our freedom” to gain the support of “various small groups” at the margins. “The people,” he asserted, “do not want it done.”⁶⁸ This was talking about race without mentioning race. Stennis associated Black interests with base political calculations and granted to White interests the cloak of the Constitution and the American Way. In Stennis’s usage, “The people” as a category, in all its Jeffersonian glory, was implicitly White. That Stennis thought civil rights proponents were playing cheap political tricks was unsurprising, but the utility of him saying so out loud was questionable at best.

The use of ostensibly neutral language that was in fact full of racial content was to be an abiding feature of Stennis’s rhetoric. Yet in his first speech he also included an explicit defense of his paternalist beliefs and the White southern way of life. “The white people protect the Negroes,” Stennis lectured, “and respect them in the proper and mutually understood and mutually desired relations between the races.” In this brief formulation the key points of the paternalist worldview were articulated. White southerners were the only ones who really understood Blacks, and thus the only ones who could help them. “Let them work out their salvation in this great section where the races live in the closest and friendliest contact and are happier together than are similar people

⁶⁷ John C. Stennis to J. Lewis Henderson, 27 March 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 14, JCS.

⁶⁸ *CR*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 4 March 1948, 2103-4.

anywhere else in the world under like conditions.” When left alone, the South was marked by steady progress, friendly interactions between the races, and happy “Negroes.” The danger came from outsiders and “agitators” who came in and stirred up trouble, causing otherwise contented Blacks to get false notions in their heads. All that was needed was more time to let White southerners complete their uplifting work in a process of mutually beneficial organic change. If that process was shortchanged by the imposition of federal legislation, “It will fail, and the Negro will be the serious victim of that failure.”⁶⁹

Southern senators successfully beat back President Truman’s civil rights agenda in the spring, as Congress recessed without passing any of the proposals. At the Democratic convention in July, Truman called for Congress to return to Washington and pass parts of his agenda, including civil rights. Prospects appeared dim, but a special session was nonetheless good politics for an administration counting on a strong northern Black vote in November.⁷⁰ Advocates rested their hopes in passage of an anti-poll tax bill. In a measure of the respect he had already gained from his southern colleagues, Stennis was chosen to lead off the filibuster on 29 July. By 4 August it was clear no civil rights bills would pass the Senate before the election.⁷¹ In his second major speech of his Senate career, Stennis took a notably more legalistic approach and discarded his defense

⁶⁹ *CR*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 4 March 1948, 2105.

⁷⁰ “Special Session Called ‘Smart Political Move,’” *Anniston Star*, 16 July 1948, 1.

⁷¹ “South Opens Filibuster against Anti-Poll Tax Measure before Senate,” *Anniston Star*, 29 July 1948, 1; William S. White, “Southerners Win in Poll Tax Fight; Credit Curbs Gain,” *New York Times*, 5 August 1948, 1.

of the paternalist ethos. His case against the poll tax bill is instructive, for it reveals how a deep excursion into constitutional minutia could serve the countermovement's cause. Aided by the embedded structures of American law, Stennis could defend White supremacy without naming it.

His argument against the poll-tax legislation hinged on a specific interpretation of two arcane pieces of language in the Constitution. In article one, section two, the Constitution stated that voting eligibility for federal elections was to be based on the "qualifications" states established for the election of their own legislatures. This implied that state laws effectively determined who could vote in federal elections, leaving the federal government no constitutional right to interfere.⁷² It followed that removing state poll taxes would require a constitutional amendment rather than a mere act of Congress. But article four, section two seemed to present a problem for Stennis's position. It gave to states the responsibility for the "Times, Places and Manner of holding elections" but allowed that Congress might "make or alter such Regulations."⁷³ In contrast to the prior article, this appeared to grant supremacy to Congress to change state voting laws.

Reading article one and article two together, it was clear that the constitutionality of the poll tax bill depended on what constituted "qualifications" (which were under the domain of the states), and what constituted "the manner" of elections (over which

⁷² Article one, Section two reads: "The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States, and the Electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature."

⁷³ The relevant portion of Article two, Section four reads: "The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations, except as to the Places of chusing Senators."

Congress had supremacy). If poll taxes were merely a part of “the manner” of elections then Congress could legislate against them. But if they were voter “qualifications,” as a more natural reading seemed to imply, then Congress had no recourse except a constitutional amendment. In fact, the drafters of the bill acknowledged as much. In the text of the bill itself was the startling declaration that the payment of a poll tax “is not and shall not be deemed a qualification of voters...but is and shall be deemed an interference with the manner of holding primaries and other elections.” Whatever one thought of this debatable point, Stennis said, it was not Congress’s place to simply declare it to be so by “legislative fiat.” In his view, the drafters of the bill had recognized the potential constitutional problem, but brazenly erased it by declaring their own definition of what poll taxes were under the Constitution.⁷⁴

The courts would have to pass on this question, and Stennis believed he had precedent on his side. He pointed out that at the time the Constitution was ratified all of the states had some form of property qualification or poll tax for voting. These laws were clearly covered by the “qualifications” left to the states under the Constitution. A century later, in 1884, the Supreme Court unequivocally reaffirmed that the right to vote in federal elections was based on the qualifications established by the states for their own state elections. As recently as 1937, in *Breedlove v. Suddles*, the Supreme Court had unanimously upheld poll taxes while declaring that the “Privilege of voting is not derived from the United States, but is conferred by the State and,” within the constraints of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, “the State may condition suffrage as it deems

⁷⁴ CR, 80th Cong., 2nd Sess., July 29, 1948, 9490.

appropriate.”⁷⁵ Stennis’s argument depended on a specific definition of terms such as “qualifications” and “manner of elections,” but it was not at all clear that the bill’s supporters offered a more straightforward interpretation of the Constitution and judicial precedent.

The technicality of these arguments can obscure the deeper dynamic on which they depended. Stennis did not need to resort to crude demagoguery to defend White supremacy. On the contrary, he could reasonably argue that he had the Constitution and traditional American forms of government on his side. In seeking to limit suffrage and keep it under the control of the states, Stennis placed himself squarely in the mainstream of American practice up to that time. Those seeking to expand voting rights were, in a sense, attempting to overturn the traditional structures of American republicanism. This was a vital source of strength for Stennis and his allies, for Americans were increasingly uncomfortable with open defenses of White supremacy for its own sake. The ability to draw on constitutional and judicial precedent to defend his position allowed Stennis to ignore the core fact that one of the primary purposes of poll taxes was the eradication of Black political power. Precisely because White supremacy was so embedded in American law and practice, Stennis and his allies were at times able to defend it without speaking its name.

As the civil rights bills went down to defeat that summer, President Truman salvaged what he could from the wreckage with an executive order desegregating the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 9493.

military.⁷⁶ The Democratic Party was at war with itself as the southern wing fought for White supremacy and the northern wing appealed to Black voters who might swing the election one way or the other. At the Party convention in July the liberals pushed through a strong civil rights plank, leading the Mississippi delegation to walk out. Governor Wright of Mississippi made good on his threat to split from the national party, and just two days after bolting the convention, a meeting of southern Democrats in Birmingham selected South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond as its presidential candidate, with Governor Wright filling out the bottom of the ticket.⁷⁷ Stennis attended what was quickly dubbed the “Dixiecrat Convention” and publicly lamented that “the Democratic Party as we Southerners have known it is now in a total eclipse.” He believed the only option left was to “assert ourselves on the principles that we believe in, and I therefore endorse this movement for a concert of action among all of the Southern states to combine our strength for the good of our cause.”⁷⁸

While Stennis publicly embraced the movement with the confidence of a true believer, in private he fretted. The stakes could hardly have been higher. The break from the national Party was emotionally cathartic and, from Stennis’s point of view, amply justified. But he and other countermovement elites were thinking in terms of decades and generations rather than a single balloting. It remained unclear whether Thurmond’s

⁷⁶ Anthony Leviero, “Presses for Rights: President Acts Despite Split in His Party Over the Chief Issue,” *New York Times*, 27 July 1948, 1.

⁷⁷ “Governor Wright Issues Call for Birmingham Meeting to Select Opponent for Truman,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 15 July 1948, 1; “Thurmond, Wright Lead South,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 18 July 1948, 1; John N. Popham, “Southerners Name Thurmond to Lead Anti-Truman Fight,” *New York Times*, 18 July 1948, 1.

⁷⁸ Remarks to Birmingham Convention, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 5, JCS.

candidacy would do long-term help or harm to the countermovement. As Stennis saw it, the Dixiecrat movement did not represent a true break with the national Party but was rather an expression of displeasure that would, if enough southern states stood together, win “far more consideration in the future” for their cause. If the Dixiecrats managed to inflict real pain on the national party in November, they might buy more time for White southerners within the Democratic Party. On the other hand, if the election produced a more permanent fracture in the Democratic coalition the results could be disastrous. Part of the difficulty was the inherent tension between trying to punish the Democratic Party while retaining a Democratic Senate. As a Senator, Stennis jealously guarded the importance of that body to the countermovement’s cause. “A point that is overlooked by some of the thinking people of Mississippi,” he told a friend, is that “It is far better for us if the Democrats win control of the Senate than the Presidency, because under the seniority rule, the South will get most of the key committee positions,” allowing it to block civil rights legislation regardless of which party controlled the House and the presidency.⁷⁹ Stennis envisioned the White South maintaining its traditional trump card in the Senate via its institutional clout, even as it became a minority in a more liberal national Party.⁸⁰

Whether this strained coalition was sustainable was an open question. Stennis felt the tectonic shifts of political realignments beneath his feet. He believed an ideological

⁷⁹ John C. Stennis to Joe Price, 5 August 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 14, JCS.

⁸⁰ For more on the Dixiecrats and their long-term influence on political realignments, see Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

sorting had begun that would eventually create a conservative party and a progressive party rather than the ideologically mixed coalitions that defined midcentury politics. This was a prescient insight, but it was not clear where it left White southerners for, as a friend wrote, even the conservative party in this future alignment might not abide their position on Black voter suppression and other explicit elements of White supremacy.⁸¹ Stennis believed White southerners “now see more or less eye to eye with the conservative Republicans as to the fundamental structure of our government.” The problem was the “extreme liberals” in both parties who want “a regulated economy with socialized medicine and a host of other things.”⁸² Amid these dangers, Stennis saw opportunities. The coming realignment made it vital to return racial controversies to localized settings. With race off the national political agenda, Stennis believed a political alliance between the South and the West that would have the electoral power to “take over the operation of this government” was in view. If only some sort of accommodation or submersion of the racial issue could be achieved, southerners and westerners would see that “We have so very much in common” on issues ranging from agriculture to economics to political ideology.⁸³

Stennis traveled the state giving speeches in October of 1948, but for the Dixiecrats the outcome was largely a formality. There was little doubt that they would win an overwhelming victory in Mississippi, just as it was becoming clear their showing

⁸¹ W.L. Guice to John C. Stennis, 24 August 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 17, JCS.

⁸² John C. Stennis to Ed Brunini, 19 February 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 6, JCS.

⁸³ Speech to Farm Bureau of Jackson, October 1948, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 9, JCS.

in the rest of the South would be disappointing. The Dixiecrats made it all too easy for the national press to ridicule their “counterfeit” states’ rights arguments and “white demagoguery,” despite “the vast majority” of Whites across the country agreeing that “the Negro was still a second-class citizen” and not “their social equal.”⁸⁴ The Dixiecrat campaign was driven by Whites in the Deep South for whom the prospect of racial equality was a viscerally felt threat. For many other Whites who might have been inclined to oppose racial equality in fact, the issue remained a distant abstraction. Controversies over poll tax and lynching bills seemed to have little relevance to the daily lives of Whites who were more concerned about jobs, who their neighbors were, and where their kids went to school. As a result, the Dixiecrat campaign appeared provincial and extreme.⁸⁵ Thurmond carried only Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and his home state of South Carolina.⁸⁶ Ominously for the Deep South defectors, Truman’s strong appeal to Black voters in the North had more than made up for the electoral votes lost to

⁸⁴ “Southern Revolt,” *Time* 52 (1948): 26-30.

⁸⁵ A 1949 Gallup Poll found that “civil rights” was named by southerners as the foremost problem facing their region, while in every other area of the country it barely registered. This was despite a majority of northern Whites expressing opposition to robust federal action against entrenched problems such as employment discrimination. Civil rights at this time were not a pressing priority for northern Whites, and when pressed for a response their answers were ambivalent. See George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971, Volume Two 1949-1958* (New York: Random House, 1972), 835-836.

⁸⁶ Not coincidentally, these four states had the highest proportions of Black residents in the nation. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States,” U.S. Census Bureau, September, 2002.
<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html>.

the Dixiecrats. By a margin of about two to one, Blacks supported Truman. Had those numbers been reversed he would have lost.⁸⁷

The Northern Strategy: In Search of a Nationwide White Countermovement

For the countermovement, Truman's reelection was unwelcome but better than a Dewey victory, for the Democrats rode Truman's coattails to sweeping victories in the House and Senate, returning southerners to the chairmanships of key committees that would play vital roles in the next round of the civil rights fight. Crucially, the national party indicated there would be no retaliation against the breakaway Dixiecrats, allowing senators like Stennis to retain their committee assignments and seniority.⁸⁸ But he was troubled by the failure of Thurmond's candidacy to broaden its appeal. Both national parties had taken surprisingly liberal turns on civil rights in 1948, leaving the Deep South isolated. It could not afford to remain alone. If anything was clear, it was that "this Negro question is going to be in the picture for generations to come."⁸⁹ And so as the relative failure of the Dixiecrats' campaign became obvious as the election approached, Stennis's thoughts had returned to the possibilities of future cross-sectional alliances that would preserve the "southern way of life."

He increasingly believed that such alliances would require a vigorous education campaign to revive the concept of states' rights among the American people so that it

⁸⁷ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 181.

⁸⁸ "Democratic Landslide, *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 3 November 1948, 1; "Emphasis on Harmony; 'No Reprisals' Seen Against Deep South," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 4 November 1948, 1.

⁸⁹ John C. Stennis to W.L. Guice, 31 August 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 17, JCS.

could not be so easily dismissed as a “counterfeit” argument for racial oppression. For Stennis, states’ rights was “not a sectional matter but a constitutional matter” that should be considered a bedrock principle of American government rather than a provincial issue that applied only to civil rights or the South. This was the “only hope” for their cause. The people of the nation had to be “aroused” and “informed.”⁹⁰ This required a coordinated publicity campaign and a carefully crafted message. In private correspondence and public speeches, Stennis repeatedly urged his fellow White southerners to take proactive action so that they would have a constructive message to awaken the nation. He wrote to Mississippi’s state education officials requesting information on progress made so that he could give a speech on the Senate floor comparing Mississippi’s schools in 1949 to 1939.⁹¹ Stennis and Eastland sent a joint letter to thirteen southern governors requesting information on the positive steps being taken in their states to improve the lives of their poor and Black citizens.⁹² One of the results of these efforts was an article Stennis wrote for *Collier’s* magazine early in 1949 titled, “What You Don’t Know about the South.” He began by humbly acknowledging that the South “still has a long way to go,” but asserted that southerners had “begun to take the offensive” to meet the challenges ahead. He marshalled a striking array of examples and statistics showing progress in education, health, and economic

⁹⁰ Memo on Statement Given to the Press in New Orleans, 17 September 1948, Series 29, Box 3, Folder 13, JCS.

⁹¹ John C. Stennis to Mississippi Division of Instruction, 17 February 1950, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 26, JCS.

⁹² Howard Suttle, “Liftin’ the Lid, *Delta Democrat-Times*, 26 August 1948, 4.

development. He told the story of the Black farmer in the Mississippi delta who arrived with a single mule and the clothes on his back and rose to planter status, with 5,000 acres under his command. These case studies were scattershot, doing more to obscure the larger context than reveal it, but the average reader could hardly help but be impressed by Stennis's argument.⁹³

While Stennis sought to contribute to a public relations offensive, he was acutely conscious of how damaging violence and intransigent rhetoric could be to the cause. It was vital that the constitutional arguments of southern elites not be undercut by demagoguery or lawlessness back home. Yet as he and his fellow countermovement allies would discover over and over again, they were all too often at the mercy of events. Despite their clear analysis of the issues at hand, countermovement elites could not dictate the varied responses of White southerners, much less the activism of Black southerners. This essential limitation in power made it all the more important for elites to take a proactive approach toward the things they might legitimately hope to control, such as state legislative agendas. "This racial matter is going to vex us for years to come," Stennis told a friend, and White southerners must "be able to have a reasonable showing to make to the other areas that we...are in good faith in trying to deal with the negro and give him some chance to develop."⁹⁴ If they could point to concrete measures of progress, their states' rights arguments would be imbued with new force. Stennis believed that positive messages of improvement might neutralize racial controversies enough to enable

⁹³ *CR*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 18 May 1950, 7207. John C. Stennis, "What You Don't Know About the South," *Collier's*, 26 March 1949, 57-59.

⁹⁴ John C. Stennis to Ed Brunini, 19 February 1948, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 5, JCS.

a national conservative alliance to coalesce around broader issues. The perception of progress would allow those beyond the South who were inclined to agree with a conservative form of government in other respects to ally with White southerners while putting issues of race in the background. But if White southerners did not initiate their own constructive program, Stennis warned, “somebody else’s program will be imposed on us.”⁹⁵

In the aftermath of the election, the threat of such impositions seemed to have receded. Anti-poll tax bills returned “every year like spring’s birds,” but never seemed any closer to passage.⁹⁶ White southerners had bought themselves something of a reprieve. Broader trends were at work as well. The poll tax was increasingly viewed as an outdated measure that was not integral to the maintenance of White supremacy. South Carolina and Tennessee repealed their poll taxes in 1951, leaving Alabama, Arkansas, Virginia, Mississippi and Texas as the only states in the nation with a poll tax.⁹⁷ Civil rights supporters continued to push other pieces of legislation, but with little success. In February of 1950 the House passed a toothless F.E.P.C. bill, and the Senate took up a stronger version in May before predictably failing to get cloture.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ “South Must Form Program of Action on Own Problems, Sen. Stennis Says,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 15 October 1948, 1.

⁹⁶ James Marlow, “Anti-Poll Tax Bill Comes Back Every Year Like Spring’s Birds,” *Dothan Eagle*, 27 July 1949, 1; “The Civil Rights Program,” *New York Times*, 4 October 1949, 26.

⁹⁷ “South Carolina Drops Poll Tax System,” *Corpus Christi Times*, 14 February 1951, 7; “Poll Tax for Tenn. Voting is Abolished,” *Kingsport News*, 28 February 1951, 1.

⁹⁸ “House Votes Substitute FEPC Bill,” *Kingsport News*, 24 February 1950, 1; C.P. Trussell, “Voluntary F.E.P.C. is Passed by House; Senate Fight Looms,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1950, 1; C.P. Trussell, “F.E.P.C. Supporters See Closure Lost,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1950, 1.

During the debate over the F.E.P.C. bill Stennis made an important speech that was illustrative of the way countermovement rhetoric could at once soften its racial content while heightening the sense of danger such legislation supposedly represented to the very survival of the United States. Stennis argued that a permanent F.E.P.C. with enforcement powers would be devastating for the American way of life. “The bill we are discussing would go a long way toward abolishing the Constitution,” he claimed. It is only a step away from saying “for whom a man must work.” The Constitution gave no power to the federal government to tell employers how to run their businesses or declare who they could or could not hire. Yet the bill’s supporters wanted to do precisely that. This bill, he said, “is a long step in the direction of a totalitarian state.”⁹⁹

Stennis claimed the roots of the F.E.P.C. bill could be found in a Communist Daily Worker article from 1928. He declared that in “22 short years” the radical program of the Communist Party found its way “to the floor of the United States Senate” and lodged itself “in the platforms of both major political parties of this Nation.” This happened despite Americans’ obvious lack of enthusiasm for a permanent F.E.P.C. California voters had considered a similar proposal for their state two years before and voted it down by nearly three to one. In the Senate, Republican conservatives led by Robert Taft of Ohio were staunchly opposed to a strong F.E.P.C. bill and offered a bill with a voluntary framework instead.¹⁰⁰ Some of the bill’s supporters framed it as an

⁹⁹ *CR*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 18 May 1950, 7205-6.

¹⁰⁰ For a detailed study of Senator Taft’s views on the F.E.P.C. see Clarence Wunderlin, ““Be Patient and Satisfied with Their Progress Thus Far:” Senator Robert A. Taft’s Opposition to a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, 1944-1950,” *Ohio History* 120 (2013): 92-117.

important measure to counteract Soviet propaganda in the emerging Cold War, arguing that it was important to show the world that the United States protected the rights of all Americans. Stennis ridiculed this notion and recast the passage of an F.E.P.C. bill as a cowardly concession to Soviet propaganda rather than resistance to it. “Shall we abolish the Constitution because it is misinterpreted to the Russian people through the Russian radio?” Stennis asked. Should negative impressions of American society be fixed “by passing a law indicating that the Russians were telling the truth? Of course not.”¹⁰¹ Anti-communism was a fertile field of argument for Stennis as he attempted to position himself as a staunch national conservative rather than a regional White supremacist.¹⁰²

Stennis argued the F.E.P.C. bill dealt a devastating blow to local and limited government by compelling an employer to appear before a federal commission to answer charges of discrimination. “In the name of civil rights, the bill runs over...trial by jury—the greatest citadel of freedom for the average person which has ever been erected by any race.” Twelve local people “chosen from all walks of life” and sitting in judgment over local problems constituted “the bedrock of our freedom.”¹⁰³ In fact, as the traditional all-White southern jury showed, jurors were not chosen from all walks of life. Stennis’s

¹⁰¹ CR, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 18 May 1950, 7205-6.

¹⁰² The Cold War context of the civil rights movement was a complex phenomenon that both sides tried to deploy to their advantage. For the usages White southerners made of anti-communism, see George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace. Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004). For a comparative context, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). For the ways the Cold War and international opinion compelled U.S. leaders to act in support of the civil rights movement, the definitive account remains Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁰³ CR, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 18 May 1950, 7208.

paean to the wonders of jury trials willfully ignored the context of racial oppression that turned them into instruments of injustice and provided ample reason for avoiding them in the F.E.P.C. bill.¹⁰⁴ Characteristically, the racial content of his speech was marked more by what he did not say than what he did.

Stennis's use of race was carefully modulated for national appeal. Rather than focusing on the beneficiaries of a permanent F.E.P.C., he complained the law would victimize Whites. The person stuck with the cost of the bill was "the common, ordinary, garden variety of American citizen, who does not belong to any minority group."¹⁰⁵ This would prove to be a popular form of racial appeal. Eschewing direct insult of minorities, it instead encouraged Whites to take a zero-sum approach toward constitutional rights by implying that minority advances necessarily disadvantaged Whites. Such rhetoric turned questions of universal rights into battles between opposing racial groups for resources that were perceived to be limited. As Stennis struggled to articulate appealing arguments—some based on the Constitution or the supposed well-being of Blacks, others on the voluntary progress made by southern states, still others on White self-interest—he was fitfully transitioning from the paternalism of the Old South to the evocation of resentment and grievance that would be characteristic of colorblind conservatism in the last third of the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁴ For background on the racially discriminatory function of jury trials in Mississippi, see Christopher Waldrep, *Jury Discrimination: The Supreme Court, Public Opinion, and a Grassroots Fight for Racial Equality in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁵ *CR*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 18 May 1950, 7209.

His efforts appeared to be paying off. In September of 1950 influential national columnist Drew Pearson penned a fawning portrayal of the “soft-spoken, courtly, philosopher” John Stennis who was “winning friends for the South on Capitol Hill” by his “quiet” and “gracious” manner. Stennis was on his best behavior and clearly speaking to a national audience as Pearson quoted him saying, “It’s the bitter competition for jobs and dollars that stirs race trouble,” and thus economic growth was of vital importance. The South needed more business investment and education funding; then, as the region became more prosperous and better educated, racial troubles would recede.¹⁰⁶ Who could argue with this eminently reasonable perspective?

Stennis took advantage of every opportunity he could to speak before national audiences on radio and television, where he came across as amiable and soft-spoken. After watching Stennis debate Senator Hubert Humphrey on a national program, Walter White, the President of the NAACP, wrote that Stennis gave “a smart performance” that showed “the South is not as insensitive to the changing climate of national and world opinion on civil rights” as it sometimes appeared. Still, White was not fooled by Stennis’s benign and gracious manner on stage. As a VIP in the studio audience, White was invited to dinner with the debaters. Stennis skipped the meal rather than risk sitting at the same table with the head of the NAACP. Coming across each other later in a hallway of the hotel, in White’s telling a red-faced Stennis reached out his hand in friendly greeting, in a

¹⁰⁶ “Drew Pearson, “Soft-Spoken John Stennis Wins Friends for South,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 13 September 1950, 4.

single moment exemplifying the conflicting pulls on a man bound to defend his way of life.¹⁰⁷

By the spring of 1952 Stennis told constituents that he saw “more and more evidence that we of the South are doing a better job in handling the public relations feature of the negro question.”¹⁰⁸ Later that year, the *Saturday Evening Post* ran a long and flattering piece on Mississippi’s progress in improving the education of its Black children. The article recounted the impressive statistics showing that in just six years Mississippi had built over one hundred new Black schools and that pay for Black teachers had quintupled in a decade. While admitting that “Mississippi has a long way still to go,” the authors declared that “the future is full of hope.”¹⁰⁹ Stennis read these and other hints of positive media coverage as vindication of his insistence on proactive and constructive action by White southerners.

As the 1952 presidential election approached, the political climate was more favorable for the countermovement than it had been in 1948, and Stennis credited this in part to the public relations campaign in which he and others were engaged. The Republican nominee, Dwight D. Eisenhower, appeared personally unsympathetic to

¹⁰⁷ Walter White, “Dixie’s Adamant Stalwarts Are Not So Unyielding After All,” *Chicago Defender*, 25 February 1950, 7.

¹⁰⁸ John C. Stennis to William H. Watkins, 18 April 1952, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 30, JCS.

¹⁰⁹ Katharine and Henry F. Pringle, “Mississippi Gives Her Colored Kids a Break,” *Saturday Evening Post* 225 (1952): 38-39, 114-116. Some of these gains were less impressive than they at first appeared. For example, local school boards might increase monthly pay for Black teachers, only to shorten the school year and wipe out the gains. See Dittmer, *Local People*, 36.

Black goals and spoke ambivalently about civil rights.¹¹⁰ The Democratic ticket headed by Adlai Stevenson offered a marked contrast to the hard-charging Truman years, especially after the party gave the White South an olive branch via the nomination of segregationist Senator John Sparkman of Alabama for Vice-President.¹¹¹ At their conventions, both parties watered down the civil rights planks in their platforms. After the convention, Stennis admitted that “The situation was far from perfect,” but took comfort in knowing “it is not as bad as in 1948.” Moreover, Stevenson was “a man of character” who could be trusted. His nomination coupled with Eisenhower’s gave Stennis hope that the political environment was trending back in a conservative direction regardless of which party won the presidency.¹¹²

The election was nonetheless a divisive one, as cracks in the Solid South grew ever larger and Eisenhower performed better there than any Republican since Reconstruction.¹¹³ The vague outlines of a political realignment could be seen, as Eisenhower carried Virginia, Tennessee and Florida. Even Mississippi elites split, as the congressional delegation backed Stevenson while many state leaders supported Eisenhower and Mississippians voted for the Republican ticket in levels not seen since

¹¹⁰ After *Brown*, Eisenhower would say privately that it set back progress in the South fifteen years and said of White southerners, “All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in schools beside some big overgrown Negroes.” Quoted in Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II*, 24.

¹¹¹ “Stevenson-Sparkman,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 26 July 1952, 1; John L. Cutter, “Democrats Name Sparkman to Run with Stevenson,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 27 July 1952, 1.

¹¹² Campaign Speech in Jackson, August 1948, Series 49, Box 1, Folder 41, JCS; “Stennis Gives a Pat to Both Candidates,” *Hattiesburg American*, 19 August 1952, 1.

¹¹³ “At Least 41 Southern Papers Back Ike,” *Hattiesburg American*, 1 August 1952, 1.

Reconstruction.¹¹⁴ Support for the Democratic Party could no longer be taken for granted, so Stennis was compelled to explain his thinking on numerous occasions in the fall of 1952. He said he would not defend the actions of Democratic leaders in recent years. He had opposed them at every turn, but argued, as he had in 1948, that the White South's cause would be best served by continued Democratic control of the government, in part because southern senators would retain their key committee posts.

Stennis also had deeper reasons for resisting a defection to the Republicans. In a two party system, he explained, it was important that conservatives remain in each party. "If the liberals ever join the same party, and have no conservative group therein to hold them down, our system of constitutional government cannot survive," he argued. On the inevitable occasions that the liberal party gained power, it would pass all manner of radical legislation. As 1948 had shown, the White South was not strong enough to go it alone. Therefore it would have to continue to tie its fortunes to the Democratic Party, and by doing so act as an anchor, preventing the party from becoming too liberal. There were also the particular conditions of Mississippi to consider. At a forum in Jackson after the election, Stennis warned of the dangers of allowing the Republican Party to make inroads in his state. He argued a two-party system would be risky for Mississippi because it could potentially empower Blacks. This was unacceptable. Nearly half of Mississippi's counties were majority Black, and Blacks were not ready for the "responsibilities" of governing.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ "Mississippi Voting Heavy," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 4 November 1952, 1, 8.

¹¹⁵ "Abernathy Thinks Court Will Outlaw Segregation in Schools," *Hattiesburg American*, 15 November 1952, 3.

The election returns were personally rewarding for Stennis, as he was elected without opposition to his first full term.¹¹⁶ The results for his party were less encouraging. Eisenhower's easy win was coupled with crushing Republican victories in the Senate, costing the Democrats their majority.¹¹⁷ Still, there was reason for optimism. White southerners had withstood the onslaught of the Truman administration, and after fifteen years of effort to pass anti-lynching, anti-poll tax, and other civil rights bills, nothing had penetrated their Senate stronghold. After multiple bruising legislative battles over Truman's civil rights agenda, all proponents had to show for it was his executive order desegregating the military. Now there was reason to hope the incoming administration would be considerably less aggressive in pursuing civil rights. Stennis and other elites knew, however, that the battle was just beginning. No sooner did they beat back threats on the legislative front than dangers emerged from the courts.

For decades the Supreme Court had been a conservative institution protecting rights of property and the prerogatives of business owners. As Franklin Roosevelt's appointments reshaped the Court, it became a progressive force for racial change. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Supreme Court issued a series of rulings chipping away at White supremacy in education, politics, housing, and transportation. In 1938 the Court ruled that Oklahoma's effort to supply "equal" graduate education by giving scholarships for Black students to study out of state was unconstitutional. It turned the screws further in 1950 by effectively declaring segregated graduate education unequal. In 1944, the

¹¹⁶ "Absentee Ballots Now Available at Circuit Clerk's," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 28 October 1952, 2.

¹¹⁷ Wilbur Jennings, "Many Southern Democrats to Lose Chairmanships," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 7 November 1952, 4.

Court declared that one of the mainstays of White political control, the White primary, was unconstitutional. In 1948 the Court determined that racially restrictive housing covenants could not be enforced by court injunctions. In rulings in 1941, 1946, and 1950, the Court struck against segregated railroad accommodations. This sudden and sustained assertion of judicial power on behalf of civil rights for “discrete and insular minorities,” in Justice Stone’s words, was an ominous development for the countermovement. Thus it was with considerable foreboding that White southerners watched a series of school segregation cases make their way to the Supreme Court in the early 1950s.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ For a detailed survey of the civil rights cases of the 1940s before the Supreme Court, see Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 196-235.

Chapter II

Strategic Resistance, 1953-1959

White opposition to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision has become defined by the phrase, "massive resistance."¹ In its implications of overwhelming and unyielding hostility, it describes precisely the sort of ethos from which Stennis wanted to keep his distance. He envisioned a public response to the Court that emphasized the reasonableness of White southerners and their desire to improve Black schools within the context of existing arrangements. In certain key respects he did not accept the premises of massive resistance. He brought to the debate over *Brown* three key assumptions that would not only guide his actions in the years around the Court's ruling, but would prove prescient in the years to come. First, he believed that at bottom White Americans, of whatever region, were much the same. They valued their traditional prerogatives more highly than Black advancement. Second, this essential sameness implied that White southerners could win in the court of public opinion if only they crafted their message in an appealing way. Third, White supremacy would be sustainable if rendered increasingly localized and unofficial. While others loudly breathed defiance in the years after *Brown*, Stennis's efforts were marked by his belief that quiet strategy would be more effective than massive resistance.

¹ For a discussion of the origins of the term, see Lewis, *Massive Resistance*, 1-26.

He embraced a similar attitude as the Senate returned to battle in the debate over the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The contours of Stennis's response to the twin judicial and legislative threats during these years were shaped by his long-term goal of placing racial controversies in the background of national life. For Stennis, colorblind conservatism was more than a language to obscure the racial dimensions of public policy. It was an ideology that sought to remove race from the national political agenda altogether. It called for the federal government to reassume its placid posture of the early twentieth century, delegitimizing national politics as a venue for resolving racial problems. He did not need the federal government to be actively supportive of White supremacy. A studied indifference would serve White southerners just fine. He believed pragmatic resistance was more likely to accomplish this ultimate goal than loud defiance that could provoke the federal government to further action.

Preparing for *Brown*

In December of 1952, the Supreme Court began hearing oral arguments on the collection of school segregation cases that would become known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.² Stennis religiously attended all of the oral arguments to try to discern the justices' sympathies. If the Court was ambivalent, perhaps White southerners could take proactive action that would make a favorable ruling more likely. As he awaited the Court's decision Stennis had two overarching goals. First, he was determined to maintain segregated schools as long as possible. For Stennis, as for many other

² "Paul M. Yost, "Segregation in Schools is Argued," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, December 9, 1952; "The Segregation Issue, *Time* 60 (1952): 14-16.

southern Whites, segregation in the schools was sacrosanct because it touched on their most intimate fears. Schools were an extension of the home, a place where values were taught and character instilled. For the long arm of the federal government to reach in and decide who one's child must go to school with was tantamount to an invasion of the home. It seemed to imply the creation of forced social (and especially sexual) relations with morally deficient children of a degraded culture.³ Stennis's second goal was the preservation of public education. He believed public education was vital to overcoming poverty in Mississippi, winning the Cold War, and raising up a new generation of moral and civically engaged citizens. He even supported more federal funding for public schools. Yet Stennis had never made a secret of the fact that his support was highly conditional. The funding must come with no strings attached. Now those conditions were about to be tested.

Stennis knew that an unfavorable ruling from the Court could potentially bring his two goals in conflict with each other. He knew as well that no amount of determination would suffice in maintaining segregated schools if the White South stood alone in opposition to the rest of the country. White southerners would need allies. It was important, Stennis believed, to plan ahead with a view toward shaping public and elite opinion in advance of the Supreme Court's decision. After the oral arguments he wrote to the county superintendents of education throughout Mississippi to coordinate strategy. He believed the best White southerners could hope for was a ruling demanding the practical implementation of the *Plessey* standard: separate but truly equal schools. He

³ See Jack E. Davis, *Race Against Time: Culture and Separation in Natchez Since 1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 234.

acknowledged that this would be “a major problem and a big load for us.” Black schools in Mississippi were much better than a decade ago, but in private few denied that the facilities were still systematically inferior to White schools. Mississippi would thus have to “make further and substantial improvements” to meet a practical separate but equal standard. Stennis’s key contribution was to push the educational and political establishment in Mississippi to make these improvements *before* the Court handed down its ruling, so that Mississippi could present a positive face to the nation, shaping public opinion. In the best-case scenario, such action might actually influence the Court’s decision.⁴

Stennis was “deeply concerned” that even this outcome was out of reach. If the Court ruled segregation itself unconstitutional, it would “put a most difficult problem indeed before us,” he wrote, for the imperative of segregation and their commitment to the affordable public education of their state’s poor White children would be placed at odds. He told the education superintendents that it was “unthinkable” that Mississippi would comply with such a decision by allowing children to be “intermingled, thereby destroying both races.” But Stennis was temperamentally and ideologically opposed to radicals who talked cavalierly of closing the state’s schools. “I do not welcome the idea one bit,” he said, “of having to abolish our public school system.” If it were to come to that, they would have to find some means of giving public support to schools that were technically private. As his thinking continued to evolve through the summer of 1953, Stennis speculated that a voucher program might thread the needle between the

⁴ John C. Stennis to J.M. Thatch, 18 December 1952, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 30, JCS.

requirements of the Supreme Court and the imperatives of White supremacy. Each child, White and Black, would receive funding from the state upon proof of attendance at a school meeting state standards. Whites at the local level would thereby be free to set up “private” schools whose funding would be assured by the state. Segregation and public education would both be effectively, if unofficially, preserved.⁵

For such plans to have a chance to pass constitutional muster, Stennis believed immediate legislation to truly equalize Mississippi schools was essential. In the fall of 1953 Governor Hugh White of Mississippi, with Stennis’s enthusiastic backing, called the legislature into special session to pass an ambitious program to equalize Mississippi’s Black and White schools. A committee appointed to study the issue reported that “The condition of Mississippi’s schools for Negroes in rural areas is pathetic and in some cases it is inexcusable...Hundreds of children of the Negro race are compelled to attend school—if they attend at all—in unpainted, unheated, and unlighted buildings that are not fit for human habitation and should have been condemned many years ago.”⁶ This scathing indictment was the basis for a crash program of school consolidation, construction, and increased teacher salaries, paid for by tax increases. Stennis was deeply supportive of the Governor’s plan. It was exactly the kind of action he had recommended for years. He understood it as a preemptive defense of White supremacy rather than a weakening of it. But many others disagreed. The equalization agenda divided White Mississippians, and some state legislators preferred to wait to take any action until after

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Mississippi Lawmakers to Meet Tuesday on School Equalizing,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 1 November 1953, 3.

the Court issued its ruling.⁷ To Stennis, these provincially minded legislators were missing the point. Precisely by acting preemptively Mississippi could hope to influence national events. If they waited for a ruling to decide what to do it might be too late.

A month into the special session progress was slow and the outcome in doubt. The challenges for Stennis and other elites were made clear when, instead of passing the equalization program, the Mississippi House passed a constitutional amendment allowing for the abolishment of Mississippi's public schools if necessary. The Senate killed the proposal for the time being, but it was a clear shot across the bow to those pursuing a moderate course.⁸ Stennis attempted to bring his weight to bear in an address to the legislature on 3 December. "Your adoption of an affirmative educational plan" to equalize school facilities could, Stennis told the legislators, "make the difference if there should be a close decision." He stressed that the sight of Mississippi—the "most conservative state in the nation, and the state with the highest percentage of negro population"—adopting an expensive equalization program could "have great weight with the individual members of the Supreme Court."⁹ Those arguing for a wait and see approach were forgoing influence Mississippi could bring to bear on national events. Pass equalization now, Stennis urged, and show the Court and public opinion that White southerners were operating in good faith to improve the education of Black children. The

⁷ Tom Karsell, "County Lawmakers Divided on Necessity of Special Legislative Session on Equalization of the Schools," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 1 November 1953, 1.

⁸ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 36.

⁹ Speech to Mississippi Legislature, 3 December 1953, Series 49, Box 2, Folder 10, JCS; "Stennis Hits at Brownell Brief," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 3 December 1953, 1.

legislature heeded Stennis's advice, with one crucial caveat. It passed the Governor's entire equalization program except the tax bills meant to pay for it. With a hollow gesture of good intentions thus established, the legislature recessed for Christmas with vague promises of funding the program in 1954.¹⁰

By the spring of 1954, the Court's ruling was imminent, funding for equalization still languished, and Stennis's thought had matured considerably. Abolishing the public schools was anathema to him, but it was clear the tide of events might sweep Mississippi toward just such a course. If it became necessary, Stennis argued that the question of abolishing the schools should be put to the people on a county by county basis rather than eliminating the public school system statewide. "If our white leaders really took a firm hand and got out in front and molded the opinion of the negroes," Stennis wrote to the President of Copiah-Lincoln Junior College, many counties would not have to close their public schools. Even if segregation were outlawed, he believed there were "many counties in Mississippi where the negroes and whites could work out a satisfactory system among themselves whereby we would have the public schools voluntarily segregated." He believed "that this plan would last for 20 to 25 years or maybe longer." The key was to have an orderly, well-planned response to the Court decision "rather than have something evolve from the rash acts of the thoughtless or the indifferent."¹¹

Living with *Brown*: The Citizens' Councils and the Quest for Strategic Resistance

¹⁰ "Legislators Finish School Equalization Plan; Leave Financing Job Until Later," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 24 December 1953, 1.

¹¹ John C. Stennis to J.M. Ewing, 20 March 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 32, JCS.

On 17 May 1954, all the speculation came to an end. In a unanimous decision, the Court ruled that “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”¹² The response from White southerners was immediate. Their leader in the Senate, Richard Russell, called it “a flagrant abuse of judicial power.”¹³ Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia instantly announced that his state would not comply with the Court’s decision. In Mississippi some state officials publicly contemplated delaying practical implementation of the ruling for “50 to 75 years.”¹⁴ Senator Eastland was predictably vehement, declaring that “The South will not abide by nor obey this legislative decision of a political court” and “will take whatever steps are necessary to retain segregation.” Amid the palpable sense of defiance, the attitude of many southern Whites seemed to be one of calm resignation. The sting of the ruling was alleviated by the Court’s choice to put off a decision on the manner or timing of implementation. One of Mississippi’s most prominent moderates, Hodding Carter, urged, “There’s no point now in listening to the professional politicians and the hotheads. Let’s keep our shirts on. The decision has been made.” This did not imply robust compliance or wholesale change, however. “In the deep Southern states with the densest Negro population there will be little change in the immediate future,” he assured his readers. “Nor—if we actually equalize facilities—will there be much change for years to come.”¹⁵

¹² “Court Strikes Down School Segregation,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 17 May 1954, 1.

¹³ Paul M. Yost, “Segregated Schools Outlawed,” *Hattiesburg American*, 17 May 1954, 1.

¹⁴ “Georgia Aims to Abolish Public Schools to Evade School Decree,” and “Showdown Could be Postponed 75 Years, State Official Says,” *Hattiesburg American*, 17 May 1954, 1.

¹⁵ Hodding Carter, “The Court’s Decision,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 18 May 1954, 2.

Stennis agreed with Carter, but faced a difficult balancing act. Many of his White constituents were angry and expected their representatives to give voice to that anger. The day after the ruling he expressed his displeasure on the Senate floor, but true to form, he attempted to tie the decision to larger constitutional issues. He argued that the Court had abandoned “constitutional precedent” and embraced “rule by men” instead. The question of whether the country would be ruled by law or by the whims of judges was much broader and more troubling than the specific issue of school segregation.¹⁶ He obviously disagreed with the Court’s decision and said so, but was at the same time intensely aware of how unyielding defiance could look to the rest of the nation. A Gallup poll found that broad majorities of Americans in every region of the country except the South supported the Supreme Court’s decision.¹⁷

As a Senator in Washington, Stennis was much more in tune with the tenor of national public opinion than were many state officials in the Deep South. He told a friend that “on the Sunday following this decision I think every minister in Washington referred to it with warm approval or outright applause.” Moreover, Stennis said, at a large “social function” he attended the week after the decision, the Chief Justice was wildly applauded when he entered the room.¹⁸ As he had learned from his first election campaign and subsequent success in becoming a respected Senator in Washington, civil rights for Blacks were an abstraction for many Americans. They cared at least as much about the

¹⁶ *CR*, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., 18 May 1954, 6749.

¹⁷ Gallup, *The Gallup Poll*, Vol. 2, 1249.

¹⁸ John C. Stennis to John F. Frierson, 8 September 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 37, JCS.

tone of segregationist rhetoric as the content of their policies. That was why Stennis thought that “Governor Talmadge is making a serious mistake in advertising his non-compliance with the Supreme Court decision, making it a crusade of defiance.” This apparent moderation should not obscure the firmness of Stennis’s ultimate aims. As he wrote to Governor White just weeks after the ruling, “We are not going to comply with the Supreme Court decision of putting whites and blacks together, but the least we advertise that fact, the better.”¹⁹

Still, Stennis had to be clear enough in his opposition to the Court to satisfy the significant numbers of his constituents who were incensed by the ruling. Byron De La Beckwith, the man who would become infamous less than a decade later as the murderer of Medgar Evers, scrawled a handwritten note to Stennis to “insist that you openly, clearly, and definitely fight and destroy all those persons in any way connected with integration. Segregation must be maintained at all cost & with any means we find most expedient. I pledge my life to maintain segregation. We must...destroy all those associated with integration.” It would not have been unreasonable to read this as a call to violence. If nothing else, it was precisely the kind of emotional response that Stennis professed to deplore in private correspondence with his fellow elites. But when face to face with it Stennis backed down, responding, “Dear Friend Beckwith, I certainly appreciate your letter...”²⁰

¹⁹ John C. Stennis to Hugh White, 4 June 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 34, JCS.

²⁰ Byron De La Beckwith to John C. Stennis, 25 October 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 38, JCS.

In later decades some apologists would claim that the real Stennis was not a segregationist at heart. But his frenetic activity during 1953 and 1954 utterly refuted this notion. In private correspondence before and after the *Brown* ruling, Stennis emerged perhaps more clearly than ever before or since as a committed White supremacist. In a letter marked “PERSONAL” he fretted that “to huddle our children together on a non-segregated basis would certainly bring a mongrelized race within a few generations.”²¹ When the city of Washington D.C. desegregated its schools in the fall of 1954, he speculated that “desegregation of the only large city in the nation that has a majority of negro population would lead within twenty-five to fifty years to the abandonment of Washington as the Capital of the Nation.”²² In a letter to the board of trustees of his hometown school district, Stennis wrote of the need “to preserve the bloodstream of our own race.” In another letter marked “Personal & Confidential” Stennis laid bare the true nature of White supremacy and his support for it. “I think in each county we shall just have to use some common-sense coercion,” he wrote, “which in the final analysis is what we have been doing all the time anyway with reference to such matters as voting and unofficial residential zoning, etc.”²³

Stennis’s private use of rhetoric about racial purity, blood, and coercion might have been surprising enough to those accustomed to his public persona, but nothing was

²¹ John C. Stennis to J.M. Ewing, 20 March 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 32, JCS.

²² John C. Stennis to John F. Frierson, 16 September 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 37, JCS.

²³ John C. Stennis to T.J. Tubb, 21 May 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 33, JCS.

as revealing as an extended comment on voting Stennis shared with a friend in September of 1954:

I have said in Mississippi for many years that the threat to us was at the ballot box and that we would have serious trouble when we had more negro qualified electors. This is the very thing that has brought on the trouble in other States, and one time while I was Judge there was not a qualified negro elector in the District and there were not over 6 or 8 in the entire five counties when I left there. I claim no credit for this but I saw the problem in this light and kept the county officers fully advised as to where I saw the problem.²⁴

In public John Stennis yielded to no one in his devotion to the Constitution, which had established the greatest form of government ever devised. It empowered local communities and protected the rights of the individual. In private, Stennis not only acknowledged, but boasted about, his efforts to systematically deny the rights and protections of this form of government to an entire class of his state's citizens.

Yet Stennis was much more complex than the racist caricature that might seem to emerge from these anecdotes. However self-justifying or hypocritical his thought processes may seem, it is important to take them seriously rather than reducing Stennis to a stock villain. When the defense of segregation is seen merely as a problem of individual bad actors, the broader community is absolved and White supremacy is subtly entrenched.²⁵ From Stennis's perspective the necessity of coercion was part of the

²⁴ John C. Stennis to John F. Frierson, 8 September 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 33, JCS.

²⁵ Some scholars grasped this as early as the 1960s. I.A. Newby wrote that Americans "too often ignore segregationists, or, more accurately, too hurriedly dismiss them as nothing more than unreasoning demagogues or cruel and selfish bigots. As a result they misunderstand and underestimate their adversary. Epithets such as 'demagogue' and 'bigot' may in fact be apt descriptions of many segregationists, but name-calling is an unsatisfactory substitute for thoughtful analysis of the segregationist mind. It is also uncondusive to understanding the strength and tenacity of anti-Negro ideas in America." See I.A. Newby, *Challenge to the Court: Social Scientists and the Defense of Segregation, 1954-1966* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967).

unfortunate reality of what it took to help a backward race advance. Not knowing what was best for themselves, Blacks needed Whites to lend a helping hand. For Stennis, these views fit comfortably with his broader Christian faith. In a commencement address just two weeks after *Brown*, he urged his young audience to reject materialism and “follow the Gold Rule and the example of the Good Samaritan.” These values must be lived out, he said, “in our daily lives, our family lives, and in our business and professional lives.”²⁶ It was these sensibilities that caused nearly everyone who knew Stennis personally to admire his individual qualities of character. He thought a proactive southern campaign to equalize schools was not just good politics, but a fortuitous moment to finally do the right thing. A hometown friend wrote to Stennis, recalling that “you once said that we have been anti-Christian in that we have provided educational opportunities for our white children to the neglect of those of our other race.”²⁷

Informed by his unshaken assumption that Blacks could and would be led, Stennis worked through the summer and into the fall to flesh out what his county-option plan would look like. In each county, White elites would make a plan for “unofficial” school segregation coupled with “good schools for the negroes of equal or virtually equal status.” This plan would then be presented to local Black leaders as a *fait accompli*. Accept it, and everything would go on in much the same way as before. Reject it, and “it would be everybody for himself.” Stennis acknowledged that Whites would have to play economic hardball. If Blacks in a given county insisted on integration, the local school

²⁶ Commencement Address at Mississippi Southern College, 30 May 1954, Series 49, Box 2, Folder 16, JCS.

²⁷ L.O. Atkins to John C. Stennis, 2 March 1953, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 31, JCS.

system would be abolished and they would be left to “go it alone” without any support from White tax dollars.²⁸ By relentlessly pushing control down to the county level he believed “voluntary” segregation could be enforced for another generation or more. The more decentralized the oppression was, the harder it would be for the federal government to act against it. Still, Stennis’s plan depended upon his paternalistic assumption that localized White coercion would continue to work. In a letter to Governor White Stennis wrote, “Most of the negroes will look to us first for leadership and most of them are our natural friends. What the negro wants is some kind but firm leadership and some help to get better schools. He is, I think, entitled to both.”²⁹ In a speech before the Mississippi Farm Bureau in November of 1955, Stennis offered three principles for moving forward. First, there would be no integrated schools. Second, if Blacks acquiesced to this, Whites needed to improve their schools. Third, and most important, “Quit talking about it.”³⁰

Governor White shared Stennis’s breezy assumptions about the possibilities of White elite leadership and agreed with his strategy. But when he tried to implement it statewide, the assumptions of paternalism crashed headlong into the reality of determined Black activism. At a meeting with nearly one hundred Black leaders from across the state, Governor White attempted to enlist their support for “voluntary” segregation. It was clear the meeting had gone horribly awry when even a pastor whose pliant nature had

²⁸ John C. Stennis to T.J. Tubb, 21 May 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 33; John C. Stennis to Ray Davis, 15 June 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 35, John C. Stennis to J.D. Leeke, 18 June 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 36, JCS.

²⁹ John C. Stennis to Hugh White, 4 June 1954, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 34, JCS.

³⁰ Series 49, Box 2, Folder 22, JCS.

been assumed stood up and said, “The real trouble is that for too long you have given us schools in which we could study the earth through the floor and the stars through the roof.” A stunned Governor White said, “I have believed that a certain element representing a vast majority of the Negroes would go along. Now I am definitely of the conclusion that you can’t put any faith in any one of them on this proposition.”³¹ Thus did Stennis’s plan for “voluntary” accommodation, applied statewide, come to an ignominious end.

At the county level, however, significant changes were afoot. In July of 1954, fourteen White men met in Indianola, Mississippi to establish the first Citizens’ Council. The groups grew rapidly. By the end of 1956 the Councils claimed a membership of 80,000 in Mississippi and had spread to nearly every other southern state. One of the Councils stated goals was to bring their message to “the entire nation” and mobilize public opinion in support of White southerners’ cause, as elites like Stennis had been doing for years. In just two years the Councils distributed millions of pieces of literature nationwide.³² As Stennis had foreseen, *Brown* galvanized tens of thousands of ordinary Whites whose energy and initiative could provide the force needed to maintain segregation in local contexts, but it also raised the possibility of these countermovement foot soldiers acting in counterproductive ways. If Stennis and his fellow elites had found

³¹ Quoted in Dittmer, *Local People*, 39-40.

³² “Association of Citizens’ Council of Mississippi, 2nd Annual Report,” August, 1956, Citizens’ Council Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.

it frustratingly difficult to dictate strategy in the 1940s and early 1950s, it would be all the more so now.³³

Stennis possessed a hard-won reputation among his Washington colleagues as a man of decency and integrity. By 1954 the *New York Times* was describing him as a man who “carries great influence on the Democratic side of the aisle and is also highly respected among the Republicans,” a perception that was only strengthened when Stennis, himself a staunch anti-communist, denounced Senator McCarthy for pouring “slime” on the Senate by his accusations of Communist infiltration.³⁴ He was not about to risk the integrity of his reputation by a full-fledged identification with groups that he could not control and were as yet unproven. Even the logo and slogan of the Citizens’ Councils were problematic. Featuring American and Confederate flags and the words “States’ Rights, Racial Integrity,” it was not exactly a compelling national message. The very two themes the Councils joined together in their motto were the ones Stennis had spent years trying to separate in the minds of ordinary Americans. He believed White southerners could win the public relations fight if states’ rights were not seen merely as a subterfuge for White supremacy. The Councils, despite their evident zeal, were not necessarily helping in that endeavor. Yet he was aware that the Councils were vital to the preservation of White supremacy in hundreds of communities across the South. These conflicting pulls produced in Stennis a careful balancing act.

³³ As George Lewis argues, while a top-down approach is insufficient to encompass the variability of White resistance, the actions of elites such as Stennis are revealing because they were so often responding to the demands of their constituents. See Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace*, 3.

³⁴ Anthony Leviero, “Stennis Asserts M’Carthy Poured ‘Slime’ on Senate,” *New York Times*, 13 November 1954, 1.

Stennis was at first quite careful to keep his distance from the Citizens' Councils. He declined numerous invitations to join local councils or give speeches. He attempted to yoke himself to Senator Eastland, and assured supporters that "if left to our own personal choices we would certainly join." But as the state's senators in Washington, they would be defending segregation "with the Nation as an audience," and would face questions from radio and TV programs where they would not have the chance to give fulsome answers. It would be better to not have to defend personal membership in the Councils per se, "but at the same time we would support them, advise them and undertake to represent their full purposes." Stennis forwarded the letter to Eastland, writing, "You will note my reference to our joint consideration of this subject and I hope this reflects our views as expressed over the telephone."³⁵ If Eastland got too far to Stennis's right it would make things awkward at best and would intensify pressure on Stennis to be more vocally supportive of the Councils. The trouble was, Eastland kept doing just that. Stennis stayed away from the first statewide Citizens Council meeting in December of 1955. Eastland not only attended, but delivered a rousing speech in which he inveighed against the "monstrous crime" committed by the Supreme Court.³⁶

By the beginning of 1956, some of Stennis's fears were alleviated. He thought that "based on their pattern of operation so far," the Councils would play an important role in the preservation of segregation. Writing to a friend in his hometown, Stennis hinted that it might soon be time to form a Council in his own county. In a request that

³⁵ John C. Stennis to Carl Day; John C. Stennis to James Eastland, 19 January 1956, Series 29, Box 7, Folder 6, JCS.

³⁶ Sam Johnson, "Eastland Urges Fight for Segregation," *Hattiesburg American*, 1 December 1955, 1.

was at once an expression of hope for peaceful accommodation and an incredible display of disingenuousness; Stennis stressed that such a Council “must always, of course, be kept within the law” and be “open and aboveboard...with a view toward protecting the rights of everyone and not as a means of oppression to anyone.” He believed the Councils could be important vehicles to promote “the right kind of leadership” that would avoid extremism and violence. In Stennis’s view, the Citizens’ Councils were doing Blacks a favor by crowding out the Klan and other extremist groups that would gain popularity in their absence.³⁷

Several months later Stennis began to work more aggressively behind the scenes to establish a Citizens’ Council in Kemper County. He explained his thinking in a letter to his cousin. He believed the heightened levels of organization among White southerners would “continue for many years to come. The counties and areas having the least trouble, I think, will be the ones that effectively guide their negroes and lead them, at the same time offering them better and better schools year after year.” By opting for a carrot and stick approach, White southerners could forestall integration for years, perhaps decades to come. On the one hand, continuing meaningful improvements in Black schools would dampen the urge for integration. On the other, persistent economic intimidation applied by the Citizens’ Councils would make Blacks think twice about getting involved in activism. In great swaths of the Deep South, where large numbers of Blacks worked for Whites as domestics or farmed White-owned land, this was an effective strategy. Stennis

³⁷ John C. Stennis to James Palmer, 4 January 1956, Series 29, Box 7, Folder 6, JCS.

reiterated that the key was to pursue this strategy on the local level, where it would be harder for outside forces to discern and combat it.³⁸

Ironically for an organization devoted to defending segregation, Stennis advocated for the inclusion of Blacks as members of Citizens' Councils. Admitting that he and nearly everyone else "do not personally like the idea," it was the right thing to do "from a common sense viewpoint" because it would enhance the image of the Citizens' Councils and give them more legitimacy. The problem, as he should have known, would be finding Blacks willing to join. The President of the Jackson Citizens' Council followed through on Stennis's advice and after a drive to recruit Black members reported back, "I regret very much to advise you that the results have been most disappointing."³⁹ While Stennis attempted to create an integrationist public face for the Councils, behind the scenes he was coldly calculating. "The prime objective of the negro leadership is going to concentrate more and more in getting to the ballot box," Stennis foresaw, "rather than into the public schools. I have said for many years that this is where the real danger lies." It was in this area that a Citizens' Council could play a key role in majority Black counties like Kemper. "The key, of course, to their becoming qualified electors is to register," and it was this registration that must be prevented. Stennis advised that county registrars should be supported by "an unofficial advisory committee" drawn from the Citizens' Councils to "meet any situations which may arise." In this oblique way, Stennis appeared to call for an organized committee that would stand ready to deliver

³⁸ John C. Stennis to Tom A. Stennis, 6 March 1956, Series 29, Box 7, Folder 10, JCS.

³⁹ John C. Stennis to Ellis W. Wright, 16 February 1956; Ellis W. Wright to John C. Stennis, 21 February 1956, Series 29, Box 7, Folder 6, JCS.

intimidation, economic or otherwise, to any Blacks who dared to try to register to vote.⁴⁰

These strategic calculations were, of course, not fit for public consumption.

Stennis's delicate dance with the Citizens' Councils represented in concrete form many of the dilemmas countermovement elites faced in the years after *Brown*. In attempting to resist the ruling quietly so as not to provoke further assaults from the federal government on their way of life, they confronted the discordant imperatives of local politics and national influence. They grappled with the tension between private calculation and public messaging. It might make strategic sense, as Stennis said, to "advertise" their resistance as little as possible, but what of their most engaged and passionate constituents, who seemed to think the preservation of White supremacy was merely a matter of willpower and loud pronouncements? To achieve buy-in from average southern Whites the strategy had to be discussed. Yet the very act of explaining it undercut the discretion and quietness with which it was meant to be carried out. Not unlike Stennis's first months in the Senate, there was a constant need to assure his constituents and explain his strategy. This was a fundamental tension in a strategy premised on being quiet about White southerners' true intentions. The search went on for a line of resistance that would at once draw Americans beyond the South to their side and preserve White supremacy.

The Limits of Strategic Resistance: The Southern Manifesto

As the two year anniversary of *Brown* neared, White southerners intensified their response. Several states, including Mississippi, passed laws allowing for closure of their

⁴⁰ John C. Stennis to Tom A. Stennis, 6 March 1956, Series 29, Box 7, Folder 10, JCS.

public schools if necessary. Mississippi tightened voting restrictions and established a “State Sovereignty Commission” that conducted an extraordinary level of surveillance of the state’s citizens.⁴¹ In his State of the Union Address on 6 January 1956, President Eisenhower urged Congress to form a commission to study allegations that “Negro citizens are being deprived of their right to vote” and “subjected to unwarranted economic pressures.”⁴² It was in this context that the southern Senate caucus met in the first week of February 1956 and delegated to three senators the task of crafting a unified response to the Supreme Court. The genesis of what would popularly be called the “Southern Manifesto” is murky. Some saw Senator Thurmond as the driving force behind the document; others viewed it as little more than a reelection vehicle for Georgia Senator Walter George, who faced a potential primary challenge from former Governor Talmadge.⁴³ What is clear is that Stennis was one of the three senators, along with Richard Russell and Sam Ervin, chosen to craft the final document. Then, on 12 March 1956, Walter George was given the honor of presenting the Manifesto on the floor of the Senate.

⁴¹ Though the sovereignty commission would come to symbolize Mississippi as the “closed society,” it was in many respects the kind of elite leadership Stennis believed in. The commission kept tabs not only on Black activists, but on the state’s White extremists in an effort to prevent outbreaks of violence that would draw the attention of the federal government. See Anders Walker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29. See also Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

⁴² Anthony Lewis, “Eisenhower Asks Civil Right Study,” *New York Times*, 6 January 1956, 13.

⁴³ “Humphrey Seeks Court Support to Counter Southern ‘Manifesto’,” 13 March 1956, *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*, 1. See also Finley, *Delaying the Dream*, 142-146; Crespino, *Strom Thurmond’s America*, 105-107; “The Southern Manifesto,” *Time* 67 (1956): 27. Accounts such as the one in *Time* magazine did not even mention Stennis’s role, but his constituents in Mississippi were well aware of it. Drafts and correspondence pertaining to the Manifesto are in his personal papers at Mississippi State University.

For the long-term interests of the countermovement, it was almost certainly a mistake. The blowback was immediate, as senators took to the floor to denounce the divisive document and much of the national press treated it unfavorably. Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon thundered, “You would think today Calhoun was walking and speaking on the floor of the Senate.”⁴⁴ Drew Pearson thought the Manifesto had not gone over well at all outside the South. Indeed, it had “aroused so much resentment among Northern voters” that it imperiled the loose coalition between southern Democrats and conservative Republicans on which the White South had relied to defeat civil rights legislation.⁴⁵ *Time* magazine noted the potential party-splitting implications of the document, speculating that a reprise of 1948 might be in the cards. The reaction was not wholly negative, however, as some nationally syndicated columnists praised the Manifesto. Holmes Alexander, a conservative Republican, pointed out that many of the Manifesto’s signatories were at the “forefront of the fight to keep down the national debt, to restrain the spread of federal activity, to hold the line on labor, to throw Communists out of government.” The struggle against school integration was of a piece with these other issues. “There are many skirmishes, but it’s the same battle.” Columnist Thurman Sensing agreed. The Manifesto dealt with integration, but it was really about the broader

⁴⁴ Quoted in Finley, *Delaying the Dream*, 148.

⁴⁵ Drew Pearson, “We Could Have Avoided Troubles Over Greece,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 19 March 1956, 4.

“principle that all rights not granted to the federal government are reserved to the states and to the people.”⁴⁶

Much of the text of the Manifesto was in itself not particularly inflammatory. The authors noted that the Constitution did not mention education at all. According to their interpretation, that left it under the domain of the 10th amendment. Neither did the Congress that passed the 14th amendment appear to believe the equal protection clause applied to segregated education, as it mandated segregated schools in the nation’s capital. At the time the amendment was adopted, segregated schools were the customary practice across the nation. For one hundred years, this state of affairs was upheld by the courts. Indeed, the principle of separate but equal could be traced back to the city of Boston’s segregated schools in 1849. The Manifesto emphasized the right of northern states to desegregate their schools as they wished, but flatly declared that the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision mandating desegregation was a “clear abuse of judicial power” that usurped the “Constitution as the fundamental law of the land.” In a key passage, the authors implored “the states and people who are not directly affected by these decisions to consider the constitutional principles involved against the time when they too, on issues vital to them, may be the victims of judicial encroachment.”⁴⁷

In its appeal to the sanctity of original intent when interpreting the Constitution, the primacy of local government, and its plea to the rest of the nation to consider the broader Constitutional issues at stake, the Manifesto echoed the rhetoric Stennis and

⁴⁶ Holmes Alexander, “Long Line of Battle,” *New Castle News*, 2 April 1956, 4; Thurman Sensing, “Southern Manifesto is ‘Legal’ Rebellion,” *Lima News*, 6 April 1956, 26;

⁴⁷ “Text of 96 Congressman’s Declaration on Integration,” *New York Times*, 12 March 1956, 19.

other countermovement elites had deployed for years. The symbolism of the Manifesto, however, was alienating to much of the country. It presented the (inaccurate) image of a united White south unalterably determined to roll back a widely popular Supreme Court ruling. The rest of the country, seeing the ruling as a measure directed at the South, was ready to accept it as the law of the land. The Manifesto even winked at interposition, proclaiming, “We commend the motives of those states which have declared the intention to resist forced integration by any lawful means.” Though the Manifesto closed by urging southerners to “refrain from disorder and lawless acts,” the apparent determination to use every means short of violence to resist a duly enacted ruling was broadly unpopular.⁴⁸ Even the naming of the document revealed the slippage that occurred between southern intent and national response. Stennis and his colleagues dubbed it “The Declaration of Constitutional Principles” only to see it nearly immediately rechristened “The Southern Manifesto” by the national press. It represented, in miniature, the persistent dilemma of the countermovement throughout Stennis’s first decade in the Senate, as attempts to nationalize their priorities were regularly perceived as parochial.

Despite a reception that was ambiguous at best, Stennis argued that the document was profoundly important because “for the first time in our national history almost 100 members of the Congress have jointly signed a severe indictment of the Court for its judicial legislation and usurpation of power.”⁴⁹ Yet the fact remained that the Manifesto was a flagrant violation of Stennis’s repeated insistence that White southerners should be

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Series 29, Box 5, Folder 5, JCS.

quiet in their resistance. For just that reason Senator Fulbright had argued against any manifesto at all, thinking that it would exacerbate tensions in ways that would ultimately only harm the White South.⁵⁰ Why, then, did Stennis not only sign it but participate in the writing of it? There are hints that the pressures of public opinion in the Deep South overrode the potential dangers of negative national reception. Less than two weeks before the Manifesto was released, the Mississippi legislature joined Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama in passing a resolution that asserted the doctrine of interposition, declaring that the Supreme Court's school segregation decisions were "null, void, and of no effect."⁵¹ The very same day the University of Alabama, in an act of spite, expelled Black student Autherine Lucy, while Mississippi's legislature stayed busy passing bills establishing huge fines for violating segregation in travel facilities.⁵²

The drafting process of the Manifesto thus occurred amid an atmosphere of fever pitch opposition to the Supreme Court and Black activism. Stennis wrote to Russell urging the inclusion of a statement about interposition, because it was "the subject foremost on the minds of the people" in their respective states, and "They have been led to believe that there is far greater hope in this route than is justified." If they failed to include a statement about interposition, their constituents might feel "that we are

⁵⁰ Stewart Alsop, "Negro Issue Faces Long Uphill Fight," *Bennington Evening Banner*, 10 April 1956, 8.

⁵¹ John Berners, "Mississippi Joins Four Sister States with Interposition Move," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 1 March 1956, 1.

⁵² "Alabama U. Expels Negress," *Hattiesburg American*, 1 March 1956, 1; "Senate Follows Action by House Requiring Separate Passenger Waiting Rooms," *Laurel Leader-Call*, 1 March 1956, 1.

abandoning them.”⁵³ Consequently the Manifesto, ostensibly a declaration to the nation and the Supreme Court, was equally a statement of reassurance to White southerners. Moreover, it was a document written to obtain as many signatures as possible, forging the appearance of unity amid persistent divisions. Emerging from such a cacophony of pressures and motivations, it was hardly surprising that its reception was varied, or that it failed to advance the countermovement’s cause. It is doubtful that Stennis would have initiated such a project on his own. Lacking the power to stop it, he did what he could to craft language to his liking.

The Civil Rights Act of 1957

Less than a month after the release of the Southern Manifesto, the Eisenhower Administration proposed new civil rights legislation. Attorney General Herbert Brownell sent a letter to Congress outlining a civil rights bill with four titles. Title I would establish a commission appointed by the President to investigate civil rights abuses. It would be granted subpoena power, but would only have a lifespan of two years. Title II would create a new civil rights division in the Justice Department under the leadership of an Assistant Attorney General. Title III would enable the federal government to prosecute state and local actors for voting intimidation in any federal election, issue injunctions, and allow civil rights cases to be tried directly in federal courts rather than beginning in state courts. Title IV would empower the Attorney General to initiate civil lawsuits on

⁵³ John C. Stennis to Richard Russell, 24 February 1956, Series 29, Box 5, Folder 5, JCS.

behalf of victims facing “conspiracies” to deprive them of their right to vote.⁵⁴ In sum, the proposed legislation would give to the office of the Attorney General significantly more power to initiate, expedite, and prosecute civil rights cases.

While liberal Republicans urged quick passage of the legislation, some liberal Democrats were miffed by what they claimed was cheap election-year politics. Hubert Humphrey called the proposal “lip-service by leap-year liberals.”⁵⁵ But if political calculation played a part in the Eisenhower Administration’s sudden conversion to civil rights advocacy after years of relative passivity, there was equal calculation in the Democrats’ annoyance. Knowing its party-splitting potential, Democratic Senate leaders were reluctant to bring a civil rights bill to the floor before the election. The Southern Manifesto might have contributed to a sense among party elders that a civil rights fight in 1956 could fracture the party more severely than 1948 and doom their electoral chances. The reluctance of the Party leadership to cross its powerful southern bloc was also vindication of Stennis’s strategy to pursue the countermovement’s goals from within the Democratic coalition.

He maintained this posture as the 1956 election approached. At the state Democratic convention on 16 July, Stennis explained his support for the national Democratic Party and its candidate, Adlai Stevenson. He opened his speech with an astonishingly blunt reading of Mississippi society, apparently confident he could shore up his right flank while the national media took little notice. “The two races” live together,

⁵⁴ “Text of Civil Rights Program,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1956, 20.

⁵⁵ William S. White, “President Offers Civil Rights Plan,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1956, 1.

but are “centuries apart in development,” Stennis averred. “Under our guidance and help, the negro has had almost a century of rapid development” exceeding anything “in that race’s recorded history. We are willing and capable of working out our own solution – not quickly or easily – but over the years. We are the only people who can work out a solution. It is our problem – our heavy heritage.” Why stick with a national party that was often hostile to this heritage? Mississippi could go it alone and “stand firmly on principle.” But this had already been tried in 1948, and it had done nothing “to bring to realization at the national level ideas about States’ Rights and individual liberties which we have long since proclaimed to the nation.”⁵⁶

If going it alone would not work, White Mississippians were left with just two options: the Republicans or the Democrats. Stennis warned that the Eisenhower Administration had governed more liberally on civil rights than it had campaigned, and was busily pushing civil rights legislation as he spoke. Besides, he saw the GOP as anti-farmer, a factor of outsized importance in Mississippi. That left the Democratic Party as the only viable option. He believed that through “skillful use of our political power” within the Democratic coalition, “there is a chance to save Constitutional Government. Our appeal must be broad enough to capture the imagination of Democrats, Independents and other solid citizens throughout the nation who believe as we do. Our conduct must be such that our leadership will be trusted.” Now was not the time to abandon the course they had set. If they could only buy a little more time, the social and political winds were bound to shift. In fact, Stennis believed “A reaction in our favor in other parts of the

⁵⁶ Speech to State Democratic Convention, 16 July 1956, Series 49, Box 3, Folder 11, JCS.

nation has already started because the practical effects of recent judicial usurpations of power, including school desegregation, are being felt in other areas.”⁵⁷

A week later, the House of Representatives passed the Eisenhower Administration’s civil rights bill. With the Senate close to adjourning for the year, it stood little chance of passage in the upper chamber.⁵⁸ There was little appetite among Democratic leaders for a bill that would redound to the Republicans’ benefit while dividing their own party. The bill was kept from the floor and the Senate adjourned without taking any action on it. Though the Democrats managed to avoid a reprise of 1948 in the November election, a nominally united party would prove inadequate to withstand Eisenhower’s electoral juggernaut, and the Republicans won in a wave that washed over Democratic bastions in the South like Florida and Louisiana. With the election of a new Congress for 1957, the previous year’s action on civil rights was defunct. The House needed to pass the bill again, which it duly did on 18 June 1957. It was not immediately clear that the result in the Senate would be any different from the year before. The southern caucus was still entrenched in its outsized position of power astride the key committee posts, and the election had done little to alter the balance of power in the Senate. Yet behind the scenes, key actors across several different Senate factions were making calculations that pointed toward letting a bill come to the floor.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “House Passes Civil Rights; Senate Death,” *Laurel Leader Call*, 23 July 1956, 1.

⁵⁹ For background on the legislative history of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, see Finley, *Delaying the Dream*, 151-190. See also Robert Mann, *The Walls of Jericho: Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Russell, and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 178-

With debate set to begin in early July, the *New York Times* assumed that the “granddaddy of all filibusters” was ahead and prospects for compromise had “all but vanished in the face of adamant Southern rejection.”⁶⁰ This fit the typical profile of what White southerners were expected to do, but it was speculation masquerading as reporting. Unbeknownst to the *Times*, a few days before, Richard Russell had gathered the southern caucus in his Senate office to map out a surprising strategy for the coming battle. Russell had successfully filibustered civil rights legislation since 1935, but this time, he told his caucus, might be different. This time a Republican administration pushed civil rights legislation, and southern senators might not be able to rely on conservative Republicans to go against their own party. Moreover, the bill was widely seen as a moderate voting rights measure. Russell worried that a successful filibuster of such seemingly tame legislation would be a pyrrhic victory. Attempts to limit the minority’s ability to filibuster had become persistent in recent years. The move to weaken the filibuster might develop overwhelming momentum if the southern bloc stopped moderate civil rights legislation in its tracks. The senators gathered in Russell’s office that day also had to face the fact that there were fewer of them. Upper South states like Tennessee were being peeled away from the caucus and could no longer be relied upon to vote with the segregationist bloc. The tantalizing prospect of installing a southerner in the oval office also could not be

224. For an account emphasizing Lyndon Johnson’s role and his presidential ambitions, see Robert Caro, *Master of the Senate*, (New York: Knopf, 2002), 887-1012.

⁶⁰ Allen Drury, “Senate to Debate Rights Bill Today; Faces Filibuster,” *New York Times*, 8 July 1957, 1.

discounted. Lyndon Johnson, a Russell protégé, knew his path to the presidency went through the passage of a civil rights bill, and Russell knew it too.⁶¹

For all these reasons the southern caucus settled on a strategy of strategic resistance rather than unyielding opposition. While the southern caucus would hold the threat of a filibuster in reserve as a last resort, they would allow a bill to come to the floor and seek to drastically weaken it via amendment. Russell hoped the passage of a token piece of civil rights legislation would be akin to a slight opening of a pressure valve, releasing the pent up demand for action and reducing the stress on the White southern way of life in future years. This was one way of looking at it. But would the passage of the first civil rights bill of the twentieth century be more like a pressure valve, or a breach in a dam? Only time would tell. For his part, Stennis readily embraced this more malleable form of resistance. Though he needed to maintain something of a defiant public face to his Mississippi constituents,⁶² strategic resistance to civil rights legislation was of a piece with Stennis's broader approach to change throughout the 1950s. His response to *Brown* had always been couched in terms of delaying its impact, perhaps for a generation or more, rather than comprehensively rolling it back. Here, too, the aim was to delay and weaken the civil rights forces rather than achieve a total victory that was almost certainly out of reach.

⁶¹ "The Rearguard Commander," *Time* 70, 12 August 1957, 15. See also Finley, *Delaying the Dream*, 157-158, 168.

⁶² Just days after the pivotal meeting in Russell's office, Stennis publicly derided the bill as an attempt to coerce school desegregation "at the point of a bayonet" and vowed to "fight it until we fall in our tracks." This unyielding rhetorical posture would not be borne out by Stennis's actions on the Senate floor. "Stennis Cites Moral Problem of Rights Bill," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 8 July 1957, 9.

Before they could significantly water down the bill, southern senators had to somehow reverse the widespread perception that it was an incremental piece of legislation that moderately advanced voting rights. Stennis attempted to recast the proposed legislation as a radical measure as early as February in his testimony before the Senate subcommittee on Constitutional Rights. He charged that the bill, though dubbed a voting rights measure, could actually be used to enforce school integration and would amount to a “coercion and an intimidation of virtually all local officials.” Far from being a moderate piece of legislation, Stennis argued that it would reduce the states to little more than administrative units and further alienate the people from their government.⁶³ Stennis’s words fell on deaf ears, but everything changed on 2 July when Richard Russell delivered his opening salvo against the bill. In a high profile speech on the Senate floor, the leader of the southern caucus tore into the bill and argued that it granted far more power than Congress realized and could even be used to enforce school integration with military force.⁶⁴

Russell’s speech was remarkably successful in altering perceptions of the bill and setting the terms of the debate. The *New York Times* admitted that Russell (and by extension Stennis, in his neglected subcommittee testimony) had “discovered” language in the bill that could reasonably be seen as authorizing the broad increase of federal power Russell claimed it did. A close reading of the text had been so neglected that “some of the bill’s leading proponents now admit that they had never even thought of”

⁶³ “Statement of Hon. John C. Stennis, United States Senator from the State of Mississippi,” Hearings before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 15 February 1957, 94-103.

⁶⁴ *CR*, 85th Con., 1st sess., 2 July 1957, 10772-10775.

the implications Russell pointed out.⁶⁵ Stennis said he was “amazed” that this was only now being noticed, as he and others had declared it as loudly as they could months before.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Russell’s “singularly effective” speech proved to be a watershed.⁶⁷ Thereafter, discussion of the bill moved away from considering what was necessary to maintain its original purpose—upholding the voting rights of southern Blacks—to how the bill could narrow its grant of federal power and be watered down sufficiently for passage.

By late July, as the Senate debate continued, Stennis spoke of the southern strategy in ways that revealed the filibuster had become an option of last resort rather than the southern caucus’s weapon of choice. While he still gave lip-service to the idea of preventing any bill from passing, Stennis admitted that their primary efforts centered on getting the bill in an “acceptable” form in the event that it did pass. This meant fundamentally altering Title III, if not eliminating it entirely, and adding a jury trial amendment to Title IV. Despite a few showy statements to his constituents, it was clear Stennis preferred this lower-risk, lower-reward strategy. If southern senators went for an all or nothing gamble and the proponents of the bill defeated the filibuster, “they then would be in a position to put through almost any bill they chose.”⁶⁸ Better to weaken the

⁶⁵ “The Right-To-Vote Bill,” *New York Times*, 11 July 1957.

⁶⁶ *CR*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 11 July 1957, 11312.

⁶⁷ “Civil Rights—Best Chance?” *Newsweek*, 15 July 1957, 23-24.

⁶⁸ Gordon Brown, “Southerners Devise Strategy On Day-By-Day Basis In Fight,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 23 July 1957, 13.

bill while remaining coy about its final passage than initiate a filibuster that, if it went horribly wrong, could shatter the White South's power in the senate.

Stennis gave his first major speech against the bill on 12 July. He portrayed it as a radical attack on basic American norms of governance. He argued that Title III's grant of authority to act against civil rights violations was so broad it could be used for almost anything the Attorney General deemed expedient. Moreover, the bill's enforcement provision was tied to an obscure Reconstruction era statute that could theoretically justify the use of federal troops. "The power to use force is in the bill," Stennis warned, and "We cannot meet that issue by saying, 'Oh, well, it will not be used.'"⁶⁹ Because title III was so broad and vague in its grant of power to the Attorney General, Stennis argued that it would be a decisive blow against the traditional prerogatives of the states. He warned that increased federal power in the area of civil rights would set a precedent leading to future aggregations of centralized power in other areas. As he had throughout the decade, Stennis continued to present a strong appeal to localism. He argued that it was both the foundation of the American system of government and the only firm ground for racial progress. "The strength of our great Nation," Stennis averred, "lies at the local level, among the local people." But by granting "roving power" to the Attorney General to unilaterally act against local officials, the bill would quench the vigor of local government by instilling an "atmosphere of fear."⁷⁰ To solve the problems the bill purported to address, Stennis urged his colleagues to trust the people of local

⁶⁹ *CR*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 12 July 1957, 11492.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11493, 11495.

communities in the South, “members of both races” who possessed “civic pride” and were quietly going about the work of racial progress through “constructive cooperation.”⁷¹

Stennis’s argument against Title IV was built on similar themes. At the heart of the debate over Title IV was the question of whether defendants in civil rights cases should have the right to a jury trial. Liberals argued that the bill followed traditional practices in not allowing jury trials in suits to which the United States was a party. Stennis contended that by greatly expanding the range and number of cases to which the United States would be a party, the bill effectively repealed the right of trial by jury where it had existed before. While liberals saw a jury trial amendment to title IV as a special and unwarranted concession, southern senators argued it merely protected existing rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Stennis presented the jury trial as a central pillar of self-government and a cornerstone of American freedom developed painstakingly over the centuries. The bill’s sidestepping of jury trials was an insult to an entire section of the country, essentially telling millions of White southerners that they were not fit for self-government. “Can we say,” Stennis asked, “that [White southerners] are disloyal and that we cannot entrust to them the jury system?” To ask the question was to answer it. “I believe that the charge that southern juries would not convict in proper cases is unsustainable by the facts.”⁷² The facts on the ground were decidedly against

⁷¹ Ibid., 11495.

⁷² Ibid., 11494, 11498. Stennis made this bald assertion less than two years after an all-White jury in Mississippi perfunctorily deliberated for 65 minutes before acquitting Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam of the murder of Emmet Till. Months later the men boasted of the murder in an interview with *Look* magazine.

Stennis, but the Senate focused much more on the constitutional implications of Title IV than on the oppressive social context that made jury trials so problematic. It was a testament to how skilfully the southern caucus framed the boundaries of the discussion.

The speeches of Stennis and his colleagues continued to shift opinion of the bill. National media organs repeated southern arguments and gave them significant credence.⁷³ William F. Buckley, founder of the fledgling flagship publication of the New Right, *National Review*, laid bare what was really at stake. He praised the southern caucus for its stand for the right of trial by jury, precisely because it would allow Whites, as the more culturally and morally advanced race, to continue to rule.⁷⁴ Liberal senators were relatively passive in the face of White southerners' assertions that their juries were reliable conveyers of justice. Indeed, Stennis and his allies stated their position with such fervor and certainty that their liberal colleagues could hardly challenge them without calling White southerners' honor and integrity into question. This was a step most senators were unwilling to take in 1957. Senator O'Mahoney, a grizzled New Dealer from Wyoming, urged his liberal colleagues to "open their eyes and look at the great

William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look*, 24 January 1956, 46-50.

⁷³ In an editorial, *The Wall Street Journal* said it was skeptical of claims that White southerners would not convict fellow Whites for civil rights violations against Blacks. Even if that were true, the Journal argued, "it could then be argued with some logic that any law so objectionable that one-fourth of the population of the entire country can be immediately counted on to disobey it, is a law that ought to be long looked before it is enacted anyway." Quoted in *CR*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 12 July 1957, 11455.

⁷⁴ See "Why the South Must Prevail," *National Review*, 24 August 1957, 148-149. Buckley wrote, "The central question that emerges...is whether the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is *Yes*—the White community is so entitled because, for the time being, it is the advanced race."

contributions the South has made, and to have some confidence in the ability of the South to make more contributions. Without regard to race or color...they will come through.”⁷⁵ With the southern caucus peeling off liberals like O’Mahoney in favor of compromise, debate was playing out as Russell had hoped it would.

Ten days after Stennis’s major speech, the Senate voted 90-0 to remove the Reconstruction era force provision from Title III, while the press reported that a jury trial amendment to Title IV was likely.⁷⁶ These were huge victories for the southern caucus, but more work remained. Despite the repeal of the force provision, Stennis and his allies wanted to remove Title III entirely. This was accomplished in a 52-38 vote on 24 July. The southern caucus was joined by the entirety of the peripheral South, eleven liberal Democrats, and eighteen Republicans.⁷⁷ The successful cobbling together of this diverse coalition reflected the political calculations of key figures like Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson and the genuine concerns of senators who accepted southern arguments about the supposedly broad and excessive extension of federal power. The excision of Title III dramatically narrowed the potential scope of the bill, turning it into the limited voting rights bill that was initially advertised. On 2 August the southern caucus achieved the final item on its wish list with the passage of a jury trial amendment to Title IV.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ CR, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 8 July 1957, 11007.

⁷⁶ “South Gains Faster in Civil Rights Dispute,” *Hattiesburg American*, 22 July 1957, 1.

⁷⁷ William S. White, “Senate Restricts Civil Rights Bill to the Vote Issue,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1957, 1.

⁷⁸ “Ike Blasts Passage of Jury Amendment,” *Hattiesburg American*, 2 August 1957, 1.

The watering down of the bill cleared the way for its passage on 7 August by a 72-18 vote, with only the southern caucus dissenting. After passing the House, the reconciled bill returned to the Senate and was sent to President Eisenhower's desk on 29 August.⁷⁹ In two speeches during the month of August, Stennis acknowledged the victories he and his colleagues had achieved, but went on record opposing the bill even in its hollowed-out form. When asked if the changes in the bill were a "southern victory," he said, "not in the least." Rather, it was "a victory for the Nation." Racial tension was not a southern problem, he declared, but an American one. More than that, it was an ancient human problem. Liberal activists, in violation of the American way, were trying to "pit one group against another, and assert the rights of one group at the expense of the rights of the other, or advance one group by sacrificing the other."⁸⁰ In this revealing phrasing, Stennis continued to frame the status quo of White supremacy as a colorblind, level playing field, while recasting racial equality as a zero-sum competition between opposing groups. The real solution, as ever, was localism. For Stennis, true racial progress was achieved by responsible civic-minded leaders of both races working together in their local communities. By weakening the bill the southern caucus had preserved localism and defended the nation. Stennis believed the Senate's moderation of the bill would "go far toward removing this delicate area of human relationships from the political arena."⁸¹ This was the heart of Stennis's agenda and the ultimate aim of his

⁷⁹ "House Delays Showdown on Senate-Passed Rights Bill," *Hattiesburg American*, 8 August 1957, 1; Joe Hall, "Civil Rights Bill is Sent to President," *Hattiesburg American*, 30 August 1957, 1.

⁸⁰ *CR*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 28 August 1957, 16229.

⁸¹ *CR*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 7 August 1957, 13834.

strategic resistance throughout the 1950s. The maintenance of White supremacy did not require an actively supportive Federal government. It merely required the government to avoid race-consciousness in the formulation of public policy, allowing issues of race be settled at the local level.

This was why the civil rights commission created by the still-intact Title I was so dangerous from Stennis's perspective. It would keep racial controversies on the national political agenda. Stennis understood that White southerners had been successful in shaping the debate over the civil rights bill in part because of the fragmentary state of knowledge senators possessed about the South. The conditions on the ground were murky for northern senators, and there was a dearth of documented and quantifiable data on the scope of southern injustices. The proposed commission, with its investigatory and subpoena powers, could change this dynamic and thereby alter the terms of future civil rights debates in the Senate. Stennis worried that the commission would be stocked with "race-baiters" and "troublemakers" who would produce "a fountainhead of misleading information."⁸² This was a prescient concern. In the debates of the ensuing decade, the findings of the commission would be a thorn in Stennis's side.

In the aftermath of the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, Stennis had to answer his constituents who were miffed by the failure of the southern caucus to fulfill his promise to "fight it until we fall in our tracks." In light of the national political environment and the forces arrayed against them, Stennis argued that the southern caucus

⁸² *CR*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 28 August 1957, 16229.

had actually won a significant victory. They began with a bill that was broad and vague enough that it could have been used to force implementation of *Brown* by an Administration with the will to do so. They ended with a narrow bill focused solely on voting rights, with little power to enforce even that. Strategic, malleable resistance was vindicated. It was important to continue pairing this with proactive local action of the kind he had urged before *Brown* was decided. To those who despaired of Mississippi's school equalization program making a difference, Stennis warned that abandoning it would leave them with "no foundation to sell our case to the nation."⁸³

There was to be little relief for White southerners. The very day the Senate passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, a federal judge ordered the school board of Little Rock, Arkansas to proceed with a gradual integration plan.⁸⁴ Events in Little Rock swiftly escalated into a crisis which ended, ironically, the very way southern senators feared such standoffs would if Title III was not removed from the bill: forced integration at the hands of federal troops. President Eisenhower did not have Title III, but he was determined to enforce the court order. Stennis wrote to the President, pleading with him to draw back. "The real issue at stake is the survival of our public school," he argued. The objections of the mothers of both races were not offered in a "spirit of defiance or lawlessness on their part. They are sincere, patriotic, law-abiding citizens" who understood that traditional social patterns could not be "swept aside by force."⁸⁵ As shocking as Little Rock was to

⁸³ "Dixie's in Danger, Says Senator Stennis," *Hattiesburg American*, 21 October 1957, 15; Tim Parker, "School Equalizing," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 28 October 1957, 4.

⁸⁴ "Little Rock Told to Start Pupil Integration," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 31 August 1957, 8.

⁸⁵ John C. Stennis to President Eisenhower, 1 October 1957, Series 29, Box 4, Folder 39.

Stennis and his constituents, most of them responded not with the old rhetoric of White supremacy, but more subtle appeals to freedom of association. “We ask no more,” one Mississippi woman wrote to Stennis, “than to be left to our own way of life to be free to associate or to disassociate with whom we choose.”⁸⁶

Though Little Rock was an ominous portent of things to come, the decision of the southern caucus to forgo the filibuster in 1957 and allow a weak bill to pass did bring them something of a legislative reprieve. For the moment the Eisenhower Administration appeared content to allow the first civil rights act of the twentieth century to do its work and wait to see the results. During 1958 and 1959, Stennis remained deeply engaged in the constant quiet work necessary to defend White supremacy, but the pressure in the Senate slackened. He spent more time on agricultural policy, which had been his calling card in his election to the Senate over a decade before. He also burnished his foreign policy credentials with two extensive trips, to the Soviet Union in 1958, and Asia in 1959. The battles over civil rights were ongoing, but Stennis clearly enjoyed the broader field of action Cold War foreign policy provided, and the power that came with it.⁸⁷

Stennis’s first dozen years in the Senate were marked by frustration and defeat. White southerners’ most aggressive attempt to assert themselves, the revolt of 1948, had failed to gain broad traction even in the South. Truman’s executive order desegregating

⁸⁶ L.S. Covington to John C. Stennis, 25 September 1957, Series 29, Box 4, Folder 39, JCS.

⁸⁷ “Stennis Thinks Russians May Quit Commie Extremism,” *Laurel Leader Call*, 3 October 1958, 1; Holmes Alexander, “A Southerners Looks at Russia,” *Hattiesburg American*, October 13, 1958, 16; “Stennis Impressed on Korean Visit,” *Laurel Leader Call*, 25 September 1959, 2; “Stennis Thinks India is Key to Asia Liberty,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 22 October 1959, 3. When Stennis retired decades later, his colleagues’ tributes invariably emphasized his foreign policy work and careful attention to the well-being of American troops.

the military was a severe and ongoing blow. The Supreme Court's school desegregation ruling heightened the sense of siege, and it appeared the Court was destined to be a progressive force on civil rights for the foreseeable future. Votes in the House of Representatives consistently showed there were now popular majorities for basic legislation on poll taxes, lynching, and the F.E.P.C. Though the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was drastically weakened, it seemed hard to claim the first civil rights act of the twentieth century as a decisive victory for White southerners. Most of all, despite waves of violence and economic intimidation Black activists showed little sign of being cowed, and their work continued apace.⁸⁸

For Stennis, the search for a defensible line of resistance continued. He still believed the White South could "win in the forum of national public opinion." The southern filibuster, untested in 1957, remained unbroken. If the countermovement could prevent a backbreaking blow and hold out long enough, the rest of the nation would awaken before it was too late. "The fight ahead," Stennis warned, "will last a generation. It will not be won by speeches or conduct put forth to make headlines in Southern newspapers."⁸⁹ It would be won by quiet persuasion, informed by the conviction that at bottom, what united White Americans was greater than what divided them. Eighty years

⁸⁸ Indeed, Black protest action was clearly spreading and intensifying. Of particular importance was the Montgomery Bus Boycott stretching throughout 1956, which garnered unprecedented national attention among American Whites, while galvanizing Blacks. Though initiated and empowered by female activists, midcentury gender norms dictated that the boycott be seen as a male-led action. Accordingly, Martin Luther King, Jr. became the public face of the boycott, beginning his rise to prominence. See Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010). See also, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

⁸⁹ Speech to Lowndes County Citizens' Council, 22 October 1956, Series 29, Box 3, Folder 9, JCS.

earlier, White Americans had come together across sectional lines after a period of upheaval in the South. Stennis never gave up his expectation that they would do so again. By the end of 1959, as the Supreme Court upheld pupil placement plans in North Carolina and Alabama and some northern communities experienced the travails of integration for themselves, Stennis believed that public opinion was shifting.⁹⁰ But as a new decade dawned, White southerners knew that further assaults on their way of life were just around the corner.

⁹⁰ "Stennis Sees Court Leaning Toward South," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 18 November 1959, 6.

Chapter III

Crisis and Resilience, 1960-1964

The first half of the 1960s was a time of crisis for John C. Stennis. This chapter reframes these years of crisis as a nadir rather than a conclusion. Even as the countermovement suffered its starkest defeat in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, behind the scenes its long-term vision of a nationally viable conservatism that would cast racial controversies in the background and perpetuate White privilege came closer to realization. These were the years of Freedom Riders and Birmingham, Martin Luther King and the March on Washington, but they were also the years of Barry Goldwater, William F. Buckley, and George Wallace. By the end of this period, the parallels were firmly established between Stennis's decades-old rhetoric in defense of White supremacy and the language of a new, self-consciously conservative national movement epitomized by Senator Barry Goldwater. Stennis was no backward looking relic. His rhetoric positioned him on the forward edge of the dramatic changes that would sweep American politics in the coming decades.

These connections challenge popular narratives that simplify segregationists and narrow their influence.¹ It is true that the tools of the countermovement were inadequate

¹ *Eyes on The Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (PBS Video, 1987), Episodes 1-6. This PBS documentary has received a broader public reception than perhaps any other civil rights history. As excellent as the documentary is in many respects, it compels Americans to visualize white resistance in its

for the task of defending explicit White supremacy in the early 1960s. Growing numbers of Americans could no longer stomach blatant denials of basic rights and the violence upon which those denials ultimately depended, regardless of the respectable rhetoric in which they were wrapped. Yet these same rhetorical strategies, so finely tuned during decades of opposition to civil rights legislation, would prove extraordinarily potent once liberated from the defense of flagrant racism in the middle of the decade. Rhetoric that appeared hypocritical in the time of Jim Crow would prove more than equal to the task of defending a more subtle, pervasive, bipartisan, and nationwide White privilege in the late 1960s and beyond.

The Civil Rights Act of 1960

As Stennis entered a new decade, he was not without certain advantages. He brought to the table his own hard-earned reputation as a man of decency and conviction. It was a measure of his political skill that he had maintained this reputation while earning the trust of White Mississippians back home. His influence in the Senate increased throughout the decade. It did not hurt that his sonorous voice on the floor of the Senate could, it was said, “be heard in a wind tunnel.”² Throughout the decade his name would be bandied about, with varying levels of seriousness, as a potential Supreme Court nominee. The *New York Times* called him a “man of dignity and reserve” who was a

most extreme, demagogic, and violent forms. Complex and respectable figures like Stennis are absent from the narrative.

² Frank Eleazer, “The Lighter Side,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 12 May 1959, 4.

“deep-dyed conservative” but disdainful of extremism.³ Senator Prescott Bush, father of the future President, called Stennis “one of the most conscientious men I’ve ever met.” Senator Henry Jackson of Washington, while not hiding their strong differences of opinion, praised Stennis for approaching issues “with judicial temperament and a spirit of fairness and objectivity.”⁴ In the coming civil rights battles, Stennis would have a deep reservoir of respect from his colleagues to draw upon.

The political landscape was changing as well. On 17 April 1959, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater spoke in Jackson, Mississippi to a gathering of Mississippi Republicans. That there were any Mississippi Republicans to speak to was remarkable. That a popular Republican Senator with a rising national profile would bother going to Mississippi was more notable still. It signaled that traditional political allegiances were in flux. More than that, it symbolized new possibilities for Stennis and the White countermovement. For years they had tried to reach out to Whites beyond the South with a message of conservatism applicable to the whole country. Now, roles were reversed. Here was a national conservative coming to their state, and speaking their language. “The general feeling among Republicans is to let the states handle segregation,” Goldwater assured his audience. He argued that the GOP was the party of states’ and individual rights, and thus the natural political home for Mississippians. As for Chief Justice Earl Warren, the man behind the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling, he was a “socialist” who never should have been

³ “Decorous Investigator: John Cornelius Stennis,” *New York Times*, 24 January 1962, 14.

⁴ “State’s Junior Solon Praised by Colleagues,” *Laurel Leader Call*, 27 June 1958, 1.

appointed to the Court.⁵ By traveling to Mississippi to praise states' rights and criticize judicial activism, Goldwater appropriated the rhetoric of the countermovement and appealed at once to states' rights conservatives and White supremacists.⁶

The following year Goldwater published *The Conscience of a Conservative*, a best-selling book expounding the principles of limited government and constitutional fidelity. In an echo of Stennis's long-standing rhetoric, Goldwater wrote, "I will not attempt to discover whether legislation is 'needed' before I have first determined whether it is constitutionally permissible."⁷ He stressed the importance of "States' Rights," because they protected the hallowed "principle that essentially local problems are best dealt with by the people most directly concerned." Goldwater did not shy away from what this might mean for civil rights and integration. He wrote that the federal government had no constitutional authority to interfere with segregated schools. "Social and cultural change, however desirable, should not be effected by the engines of national

⁵ "Goldwater Tells Meeting of State Republicans His Party Is Best For South," *Laurel Leader Call*, 17 April 1959, 1.

⁶ For more on Goldwater's ties to the South, see Joseph Crespino, "Goldwater in Dixie: Race, Region, and the Rise of the Right," in *Barry Goldwater and the Remaking of the American Political Landscape*, ed. Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 144-169; and "Goldwater was the Horsepower," in Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 45-76. For background on Goldwater's ill-fated 1964 campaign and his long-term influence, see "Creating Conflagration: Barry Goldwater and the Republican Party," in *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern Conservatism*, Jonathan M. Schoenwald (New York: Oxford, 2001), 124-161. See also, "Barry Goldwater: Cowboy Conservatism, Race Politics, and the Other Sixties," in *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, David Faber (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 77-118.

⁷ For example, in a 1948 speech against a civil rights bill, rather than challenging the merits of the proposal Stennis devoted nearly the entire speech to the question of whether it was constitutional for Congress to even consider it. "Regardless of the expediency of the action, regardless of how popular it may be on some fronts," the more important task was the protection of the Constitution. See *CR*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., 29 July 1948, 9489. In a 1950 speech Stennis declared, "instead of attempting to pass a law to remedy every defect which may be found...what we need to do is strengthen our constitutional government." See *CR*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 18 May 1950, 7208.

power. Any other course,” he warned, “enthrones tyrants and dooms freedom.”⁸ In its emphasis on localism and constitutional permissibility rather than social desirability, Goldwater’s writing bore remarkable resemblance to John Stennis’s traditional rhetoric. This new conservatism feared potential federal “tyrants” even as it shrugged at the all too real and present state abuses of power. In doing so it empowered Stennis’s White supremacist aims even when it shared no direct affinity for them.

This budding conservative movement was joined by new media organs to get its message out. Most notable among them was *National Review*. Founded in 1955 by William F. Buckley, it featured a small but growing readership of middle class Whites and business professionals.⁹ Its editorial bent in the early 1960s featured relentless cheerleading for Barry Goldwater as a potential President, coupled with evident contempt for what it considered the excesses of the civil rights movement and an activist judiciary. In the 1960s *National Review* inveighed against a “Leviathan government” whose “judicial tyranny” in segregation cases threatened to extend across all domains of American life, threatening “every community, every section, North or South.” Lifting this threat was “one of the tasks of conservatism in our time.”¹⁰ Less doctrinaire but with a much larger audience, the weekly news magazine *U.S. News & World Report* offered another outlet for conservative views. Established in its contemporary form in 1948, its

⁸ Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (New York: Victor Publishing Company, 1960), 23-38. It should be noted that Goldwater’s book was ghostwritten by L. Brent Bozell, a conservative writer and contributor to William F. Buckley’s *National Review*.

⁹ For more on *National Review* and its southern-tinged politics, see Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 45-76.

¹⁰ David Donaldson, “The New South and Conservative Tradition,” *National Review*, 10 September 1960, 146.

right-of-center sensibility claimed a rapidly growing readership. Founder and Editor David Lawrence shared a weekly breakfast with Stennis and could be counted on to offer a sympathetic airing of Stennis's views in his columns.¹¹ The magazine's reporting, while hewing to the conventions of mid-century nonpartisan news, consistently framed civil rights controversies through the lens of states' rights and federal power, precisely the lens through which Stennis wanted Americans to look. In this respect it offered a stark contrast to the skeptical tone its competitors such as *Newsweek* and *Time* took toward White southerners' resistance to civil rights.

These political and media developments were important backdrops against which the coming civil rights battles would occur. The Civil Rights Act of 1960 grew out of the evident flaws of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which only marginally increased Black voter registration. In September of 1959 the Civil Rights Commission (itself a creation of the 1957 Act) recommended the appointment of federal voting registrars in the South. At his State of the Union Address in January, an ambivalent President Eisenhower expressed a vague hope that Congress would take some sort of action in the coming session.¹² Later that month the administration laid down a marker with a surprisingly bold plan that went beyond the measures over which Congress was busily bickering. Under Attorney General William P. Rogers' plan, after a Black southerner brought a suit alleging denial of voting rights under the 1957 Act, federal judges would be empowered to appoint "referees" to

¹¹ John C. Stennis to A.B. Farris, 19 May 1967, Series 29, Box 2, Folder 3, JCS.

¹² Anthony Lewis, "Eisenhower Wary on Plan to Widen Rights Law," *New York Times*, 3 January 1960, 1; "Text of President Eisenhower's Message to Congress on the State of the Union," *New York Times*, 8 January 1960, 10.

oversee both state and federal elections in a given area to ensure voting rights were upheld. Subsequent interference with voting in the overseen region could lead to individuals being held in contempt of court. Crucially, both the finding of discrimination that allowed for referee appointments and subsequent contempt declarations would be performed by judges alone, without jury trials.¹³

This threatened to roll back everything Stennis and his allies had achieved in weakening the 1957 law. Sensing a serious threat, Stennis vowed there would be no compromise this time.¹⁴ Adding to White southerners' sense of siege, during the month of February a sit-in movement protesting segregation spread rapidly across the South. The heightened visibility of Black demands and the violence of White responses contributed to the sense that Congress had to pass a bill, if only to relieve some tension.¹⁵ The Senate debated civil rights proposals intermittently throughout the first months of 1960, but it was the House that acted first, passing a compromise bill on 24 March. The Senate immediately dumped its legislation and took up the House bill, setting the stage for a climactic debate. As he had at the beginning of debate in 1957, Stennis put on a bold

¹³ Anthony Lewis, "Rogers Calls for 'Referees' to Advance Negro Voting," *New York Times*, 27 January 1960; "New Move on Civil Rights," *New York Times*, 28 January 1960, 30; "Here's the Latest Plan for Cracking Down on South," *U.S. News & World Report*, 15 February 1960, 42-46.

¹⁴ *Laurel Leader Call*, 19 February, 1960, 3.

¹⁵ "Battle Of The Lunch Counters: Latest Drive For Integration," *U.S. News & World Report*, 7 March 1960, 44-46.

public face, but the southern caucus was once again reluctant to risk an all or nothing filibuster. They let the bill come to the floor.¹⁶

It would be a mistake to assume that the speeches of Stennis and his fellow southern senators during the debate were hapless formalities on the road to inevitable defeat, or that the rhetoric they chose to employ did not have real-world implications. On the contrary, Stennis had ample reason to hope that the bill could be substantially weakened through their efforts, just as they had done in 1957. They had stymied the Senate's labors during the first three months of the year already, and it was not clear the Senate had the votes to pass the House bill. Significant numbers of senators from beyond the South remained ambivalent on civil rights, and they represented nationwide constituencies that were equally non-committal. When Gallup asked Americans in the summer of 1960 at what pace integration ought to proceed, over two-thirds said "gradually" or "never." The same poll found that most Americans believed that the sit-ins were actually hurting the cause of integration more than they were helping.¹⁷ It was this broad mainstream of cautious opinion that Stennis hoped to appeal to by warning of the constitutional and social dangers of legislating change imposed by the federal government.

His most potent line of attack was a warning about the hazards of centralization, coupled with a defense of the virtues of limited government and local responsibility.

¹⁶ Russell Baker, "Civil Rights Bill Passed by House; Gains in Senate," *New York Times*, 25 March 1960, 1; "South Ready to Filibuster, Stennis Says," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 25 March 1960, 14. Finley, *Delaying the Dream*, 222-229.

¹⁷ George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971, Volume Three 1959-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 1724.

Stennis argued that even a good bill with a worthy aim must be challenged because “the most pressing question is not the merits of the bill, but how far will it go eventually in permitting the Federal Government to take over...” He warned that unless the centralizing trend was stopped, “it will soon be a misnomer to say that there are States of the Union.”¹⁸ Stennis worried that as the federal government took on more and more powers, local governments and local communities would find their sense of responsibility degraded. No longer empowered, they would become wards of an overweening federal bureaucracy. “There are some in this country,” he charged, “who do not want States any longer. They want a centralized government.” He claimed that this was the aim behind the referee plan for voting rights. “There is no more effective way to destroy the States than to destroy the election laws of the States. This proposal is an assault on that very structure.”¹⁹

Stennis also invoked the principle of original intent in constitutional interpretation. The people of the South believed that the words of the Constitution “mean exactly what they say and say what they mean, and that they ought to be followed.”²⁰ If a part of the Constitution fell into disfavor, then it had to be changed via constitutional amendment rather than being reinterpreted to fit modern times. It was certainly not the job of Supreme Court justices to reinterpret it as they saw fit. In the rush to pass a civil rights bill, Stennis argued, “we are running past a great many red lights,” constitutional

¹⁸ *CR*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 1 February 1960, 1679.

¹⁹ *CR*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 1 April 1960, 7130.

²⁰ *CR*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 3 March 1960, 4286.

red lights whose violation would “plague” the nation in the years ahead. He admitted some might assume he opposed the bill because of its racial implications. “But that,” he declared, “is not the point.” At issue was the fundamental principle of upholding the Constitution in all its original grandeur. All Americans, not just White southerners, could rally behind this project.²¹

Stennis’s claim that race had nothing to do with his opposition rang hollow, especially when set against his deep-seated racial paternalism that continued to leak out on the Senate floor. He resented the notion that he and other White southerners were “bigots, prejudiced people who are trying to hold someone down.” On the contrary, he declared, “I know our colored citizens well. I was reared with them...I know their frailties...We are not trying to restrain them or restrict them...We fear...not the colored people themselves but what could happen when they are stirred up and led astray.”²² After years of evidence to the contrary, Stennis continued to put his faith in paternalist assumptions that placed White southerners in the role of benevolent uplifters for a backward people.²³ These sentiments remained an engrained part of his belief system, coexisting alongside his broader conservatism in ways that made it difficult for him to obscure. It is important not to overstate how damaging this explicit paternalism was to his

²¹ CR, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 5 April 1960, 7328.

²² CR, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 3 March 1960, 4286-91.

²³ Stennis’s call for gradual change was echoed by *National Review*, which ridiculed the efforts of Congress in the Spring of 1960, arguing that whatever bill they ended up with would have “no significant effect...In the future as in the past, the voting and other civil rights of the southern Negroes will, by and large, expand in accord with the slow evolution of local community sentiment, not the arbitrary ukase of absentee ideologues.” This was precisely the kind of sentiment Stennis sought to stoke. See “The Week,” *National Review*, 12 March 1960, 156.

credibility. After all, many Americans agreed with him. Seven months after Stennis baldly stated his paternalist beliefs on the Senate floor, *National Review* was even more explicit: “Could it be we shall never do justice to the Negroes in our midst, nor the Negroes to themselves, save as we all recognize that, as a group, they may have a lesser capacity than the rest of us for civilizational achievement?”²⁴

Even as Stennis tried to downplay the racial content of most of his speeches against the Civil Rights Act of 1960, he embraced a nearly paranoid style of rhetoric about the dangers to America such legislation posed. No comparison was too extreme. As he warned that the voting measures in the bill would constitute “a very grave landmark in the march...to liquidate and nullify the place and the effectiveness of the States in these United States,” he raised the specter of Nazi Germany. Stennis argued that the horrors of the Second World War flowed from Hitler’s destruction of states’ power in the German federal system. He admitted that the United States was a “very long way” from this outcome, but declared that “our country is traveling in the same direction, insofar as centralized power, centralized government, and the gradual emasculation of the States of the United States themselves are concerned.”²⁵ With such rhetoric Stennis converted his concerns into apocalyptic terms while obscuring the racial origins of his opposition.

If nothing else, Stennis could oppose the Civil Rights Act of 1960 on procedural grounds, positioning himself as a defender of Senate norms and traditions. This carried weight in a Senate chamber full of hardened veterans who held the tradition of unlimited

²⁴ Willmoore Kendall, “Light on an American Dilemma?” *National Review*, 5 November 1960, 281-282.

²⁵ *CR*, 86th Cong., 2nd Sess., 7 April 1960, 7617.

debate as nearly sacrosanct. The debate was sustained until early April with the support of senators beyond the South who were reluctant to choke off deliberation. Senator Goldwater said, “I do not believe the Senate should attempt for a moment to destroy the filibuster, because it is the tool by which minorities may be protected.”²⁶ Goldwater helped to weaken the bill, leading to its overwhelming passage on 8 April with only the 18 member southern bloc voting against it. The failure to secure any allies from beyond the South could be read as a portentous disaster for Stennis and his colleagues.

Alternatively, it could be seen as a testament to their success in watering the bill down to such a degree that it was acceptable to all but the most ardent of segregation’s defenders. Indeed, many liberals saw it in just such a light. Roy Wilkins, president of the NAACP, called the final bill a “fraud” that was useless in securing voting rights. Senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania called the bill a “pale ghost” of its former self and a “crushing defeat.”²⁷ Stennis, while upset that any bill at all had passed, wrote a special letter to his constituents listing no less than six provisions that southerners had succeeded in weakening or removing from the bill, including diluting the voting referee mechanism and removing desegregation proposals. Perhaps most important, an attempt to resurrect the old Title III from the 1957 Act was defeated.²⁸ It was not the bill the southern caucus

²⁶ In opposing a school desegregation measure that was initially in the Senate version of the bill, Goldwater echoed Stennis’s calls for gradual change: “I suggest that 6 years is a short time in which to undo habits developed over 300 years in our country...I do not wish to see us move too quickly in this field and inject the Congress and the Federal Government into an area into which the Constitution does not permit them to go.” See *CR*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 10 March 1960, 5097-5098.

²⁷ “Civil Rights Bill is Passed by Senate Body,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 9 April 1960, 1; Russell Baker, “Johnson Praised: Dirksen Also Hailed for Role—Referee Plan is Key,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1960, 1.

²⁸ John C. Stennis, “Sen. Stennis Lists Civil Rights Provisions Southerners Cut Out,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 17 April 1960, 5.

would have wanted, but it was more a political gesture than a substantive measure likely to threaten White supremacy in the South.

The passage of a civil rights bill in a presidential election year posed familiar dilemmas for Stennis and other countermovement leaders. How could they best leverage their influence in a political environment in which the national leadership of both parties supported moderate civil rights legislation? This question was nowhere more contentious than in Stennis's home state of Mississippi. A split opened up between those favoring loyalty to the national Democratic Party and those, led by Governor Ross Barnett, supporting a plan for a slate of unpledged electors to try to leverage Mississippi's electoral votes toward a more conservative candidate. In August Stennis and Senator Eastland released a joint statement explaining that "We are now in an era of power politics, and we know from experience that the strongest and most efficient way to protect or preserve the interests of our State and the country at this time is with the national party affiliation."²⁹ Stennis believed the unpledged elector plan would not work any better than the 1948 revolt had, and would probably fare worse. At a fundraiser in Meridian shortly before the election, Stennis pleaded with White Mississippians to not "cut the ground from under me." Throwing their votes away would accomplish nothing but weakening the power of southern senators.³⁰ Stennis was to be disappointed in the choice his state made in 1960. While John F. Kennedy won a close nationwide victory

²⁹ "Mississippi Senators Stress Loyalty in Indorsing Kennedy and Johnson," *Laurel Leader Call*, 20 August 1960, 4.

³⁰ "Stennis Gives Reasons for Backing Demos," *Laurel Leader Call*, 27 September 1960, 2.

and the Democrats retained huge majorities in Congress, Mississippi narrowly voted for the unpledged electors and gave all of its electoral votes to the symbolic candidacy of Virginian Harry F. Bird, the only state to do so.³¹ Owing to his personal party loyalty, Stennis faced no retaliation for the actions of his state and advanced higher in his key committee posts.³²

Education, Crime, and Voting Rights: The Racial Roots of Colorblind Rhetoric

In the aftermath of the election, Stennis continued to communicate a vision of conservative governance with nationwide appeal. On issues ranging from the size and role of government to education, crime, and voting rights, Stennis articulated his concerns in ways that anticipated the better-known rhetoric of the so-called “white backlash” of late 1960s and early 1970s and the “law and order” ethos of national politicians like Richard Nixon. With its rock-ribbed conservative message and willful refusal to admit the racial content and context involved, it would prove increasingly effective as the decade went on, shaping the contours of thought and debate in the emerging racial order.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1960, Stennis warned that the political demand for more action on civil rights was insatiable. Anyone who believed in

³¹ “Coleman Rejects Job as Army Secretary,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 21 December 1960, 1. Mississippians gave only 36% of their popular votes to Kennedy. See David A. Breaux and Stephen D. Shaffer, “Mississippi: Emergence of a Modern Two-Party State,” in Charles S. Bullock III and Mark J. Rozell, editors, *The New Politics of the Old South*, 4th edition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers 2010), 94-95.

³² Gordon Brown, “Fate of a Rebel Democratic Congressman a Big Question,” *Hattiesburg American*, 19 November 1960, 10.

conservative government should be concerned because more “big government measures” would be on the way, such as minimum wage hikes and federal aid to education.³³ During these years Stennis also pressed for federal action against organized labor.³⁴ In repeated battles over filibuster reform in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Stennis framed his resistance not as a racial matter in particular, but as something in which all proponents of limited government had a stake. He argued that weakening the filibuster in the name of passing civil rights would lead to “irresponsible economic legislation,” including socialized medicine and federal takeovers of housing, unemployment, and education policy.³⁵ These arguments had wide appeal to conservative senators beyond the South and ensured that a strong filibuster would remain a part of the senate’s institutional norms even at the height of the civil rights movement.

In a career of remarkable consistency, Stennis’s views on education were a notable flip-flop. He had entered the Senate as a proponent of federal aid to local schools. Only after the issue of federal funding became inseparable from demands for integration did Stennis change his position and become a fierce defender of “local control” of public schools. He co-sponsored a constitutional amendment to guarantee the independence of local school boards, warning that without the amendment the inexorable process of federal encroachment would continue. Federal money, “extended under the guise of aid and ‘raising standards,’” would alter “the balance of power in the control of local school

³³ “Stennis Fears Major Civil Rights Battle,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 5 August 1960, 1.

³⁴ “Stennis Opposes Minimum Wage Hike,” *Hattiesburg American*, 2 March 1961, 13; “Urges Stronger Laws on Labor,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 28 October 1959, 1.

³⁵ “Warning from Stennis,” *Hattiesburg American*, 8 January 1959, 11.

systems” taking it from “the local school board” and granting it “to some Washington bureau.” As always, Stennis tried to make this more than a sectional issue. “This is not a southern problem. It is a national problem. I hope that our friends in other sections of the country will recognize the problems we in the South now face as a symptom of a disease which might someday engulf their own schools also.”³⁶ Though racial concerns caused Stennis’s about-face on education policy, he nearly erased them from his public rhetoric.

Crime also offered revealing insights into Stennis’s thinking. It demonstrated at once his inconsistencies and his political skills as he made use of it to fight racial battles on purportedly non-racial terrain. Nothing so clearly demonstrated Stennis’s complex perspectives on crime as the freedom rides in early 1961. Launched by groups of interracial activists to test compliance with the Supreme Court’s interstate travel desegregation rulings, the freedom rides became high-profile events whose explosive violence highlighted White southern intransigence. And they infuriated John C. Stennis. He did not understand how “so-called” freedom riders could announce their intention to enter a state with the expressed purpose of breaking its laws and not only get away with it but be lauded for it.³⁷

On 24 May, a dozen freedom riders arrived in Jackson, Mississippi and were promptly arrested. Stennis announced that he would introduce a bill in the Senate to

³⁶ “Stennis Would Guarantee States Fullest Control of Public Schools,” *Laurel Leader Call*, 20 May, 1961. In private, Stennis made no secret of the reason for his change of heart. In a letter marked “Personal” to the Superintendent of the Vicksburg Public Schools, Stennis wrote, “I do not think there is any longer any chance to have Federal aid for the separation of the schools without having Federal control. I therefor [*sic*] cannot continue my support of Federal aid for education.” 8 July 1955, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 38, JCS.

³⁷ *CR*, 87th Cong., 1st Sess., 29 August 1961, 17355. For an account of the freedom rides see Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

effectively ban any further freedom rides. He claimed many of the riders had criminal records “as long as your arm,” and were knowingly producing mayhem. “Wherever hoodlums or law-violators congregate, trouble is sure to follow.”³⁸ He then sent a telegram to President Kennedy himself, urging him to use his influence to force “outside agitators to abandon their bus rides through the southland. People who go looking for trouble,” Stennis darkly warned, “usually find it. These people are inciting riots and violating state laws in their attempts to change social patterns and customs.”³⁹ From a man who had repeatedly fought anti-lynching legislation on the grounds that it was a grave intrusion of federal power, it was more than a little inconsistent to call on the President of the United States to stop a group of bus riders.

Stennis’s aggressive tone with the President was unusual, but his constituents demanded nothing less. They did so, however, not with old-style racial demagoguery, but via fear of communism and expressions of racial resentment that would become typical of the post-civil rights movement era. A Columbus, Mississippi man thundered against the “Communitistic Tommy-Rot” being forced “down our throats” and asked, “Why is it that the White race does not have ‘civil rights’?”⁴⁰ A Hattiesburg, Mississippi resident told Stennis, “It is reassuring to know that we have a representative in the Senate who is aware these so-called ‘freedom riders’ are purely Communist inspired and subsidized to

³⁸ “‘Freedom Riders’ Jailed at Jackson;” “Stennis Bill Would Outlaw Freedom Riders,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 24 May 1961, 1; “Mississippi Senator’s Proposed Law Would Halt ‘Freedom Rider’ Tours,” *Laurel Leader Call*, 5 June 1961, 4.

³⁹ Telegram to John F. Kennedy, Series 29, Box 3, Folder 44, JCS.

⁴⁰ Locke M. Boyd to John C. Stennis, 29 May 1961, Series 29, Box 3, Folder 44, JCS.

foment strife and discord.”⁴¹ In December Stennis wrote to Attorney General Kennedy, once again urging the administration to take action against the riders. Stennis thought that “The people of my state deserve great credit for the restraint they have shown, in spite of repeated and severe provocation on the part of those who come into our State solely to violate the law and incite others to do so.”⁴² *National Review* echoed Stennis’s language, mocking the effort by a “shrill and shoving minority” to “invade” Mississippi and thereby shape public opinion. “The majority of Americans are not nearly so exercised about civil rights as the Negro zealots...unless it is *their* civil rights at stake.”⁴³

Rather than opposing the freedom riders on the grounds of maintaining segregation, Stennis raised the stakes. He argued that the growing virus of disrespect for law threatened the very future of the country. In his view the riders expressed “open and flagrant flouting and disregard for law and order...” He warned that “no Nation can long survive” when it is undermined by such lawlessness. “Unfortunately, it has become perfectly acceptable in our country for certain minority groups to say to one and all: ‘We will disregard, in fact openly violate, your laws and we dare you to resist us.’” What will become of the children, he asked, who “are being taught and encouraged to ignore and challenge authority?”⁴⁴ To make this argument, he promoted a perspective on recent events that was an inversion of the basic facts. It was the freedom riders who had the

⁴¹ M.E. Douglas to John C. Stennis, 26 May 1961, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 1, JCS.

⁴² John C. Stennis to Robert Kennedy, 14 December 1961, Series 29, Box 4, Folder 2, JCS.

⁴³ “Trends,” *National Review Bulletin*, 8 July 1961, 6.

⁴⁴ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd Sess., 4 May 1964, 9928.

backing of several duly decided Supreme Court decisions. He could not wave away the fact that White southerners, acting against the law of the land, attacked and brutally beat the riders. In this respect, Stennis's concerns about the rule of law were valid—in precisely the opposite sense of which he meant them.

Stennis tapped into something much deeper than the bare facts of recent events when he complained that activists challenged the rule of law and respect for authority. The United States, founded as a White supremacist state, had long-established traditions of two-tiered justice. White people—White men in particular—could expect certain privileges and prerogatives, a certain freedom of action that did not accrue to Black men. This was why, as a district attorney in Mississippi in the 1930s, Stennis doggedly pursued the death penalty against three Black men accused of the murder of a White man, even though he knew their confessions were extracted by torture.⁴⁵ This was the world in which John Stennis came of age, and it was the world he saw slipping away in the 1960s. The freedom rides provoked White southerners into disorderly and unlawful behavior. Yet at a deeper level White southerners were only upholding the authority that was, it seemed, rightfully theirs.

Perceptions and realities about who was committing crimes, coupled with the real uptick in crime that occurred in the early 1960s, produced a potent narrative about the need to assert law and order. Though Stennis spoke about it in a context of generally rising crime rates, his remarks preceded the riots of the 1960s and the dramatic surge in crime that occurred later in the decade. This timing indicates that his rhetoric about

⁴⁵ See Cortner, *A "Scottsboro" Case in Mississippi*.

lawlessness says more about the crisis in his way of life than the crisis in crime. On the Senate floor in early 1962 he complained that the nation's capital was becoming a "city of lawlessness." The solution was the immediate arrest of all lawbreakers and the certainty of a swift and unyielding prosecution leading to a sentence befitting the crime. The prisoners should then be made to work for the duration of their sentence.⁴⁶ Stennis argued that "as long as there is softness...in the imposition of penalties, and softness in carrying out and in meting out punishments," the lawlessness would continue. "The strongest deterrent to the commission of crime" was simply "punishment."⁴⁷

This race-neutral language about getting tough on crime was laden with racial content. For Stennis, crime and desegregation were linked. The nation's capital, as the first major school district to comply with the Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation ruling, was naturally the leading edge of a coming crime wave induced by desegregation. In a 1961 letter to an Arizona man, Stennis wrote, "crime statistics in the City of Washington should prove to anyone who is interested in the truth that integration is not good for the country."⁴⁸ In a 1960 Senate speech, Stennis contrasted the "peace and harmony" in his little town that was half Black and half White to the disorder that had

⁴⁶ This sounded vaguely similar to the convict labor system with which Stennis was no doubt familiar. Before World War Two, the arrest of Black men, often on frivolous charges, provided a steady source of labor for many southern state governments and businesses. See Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

⁴⁷ CR, 87th Cong., 2nd sess., 26 March 1962, 5013.

⁴⁸ John C. Stennis to A.H. Quarles, 29 May 1961, Series 29, Box 1, Folder 46, JCS.

overtaken Washington D.C., where “people even lock their front door in the daytime.”⁴⁹

The culprit was desegregation.

Amid this rising tide of lawlessness and irresponsibility, Stennis fretted about a movement afoot to weaken the nation’s voting standards. The poll tax was the controversy that would not die. Though only a handful of states still had poll tax laws on the books, it remained a persistent and highly visible symbol of vote suppression. In President Kennedy’s January 1962 State of the Union address, he urged Congress to end poll taxes and literacy tests.⁵⁰ When Stennis fought attempts to ban poll taxes over a decade before, he had argued that only a constitutional amendment would suffice to change such laws. In 1962, Congress pursued just such a course, and Stennis was not satisfied. He considered the proposal to lower literacy requirements especially threatening. Do this, Stennis cried, and “the Constitution of the United States is gone.”⁵¹ With key support from beyond the South, southern senators succeeded in defeating the literacy bill.⁵² But the proposed poll tax amendment was an idea whose time had come, and it was sent to the states for ratification in the fall of 1962.

Stennis’s rhetoric during the literacy test and poll tax debate is revealing, for no other issue so clearly threatened his fundamental beliefs about humanity and government, and no other issue opened so large a gap between his private and public personas. In

⁴⁹ CR, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 8 March 1960, 4839.

⁵⁰ “Kennedy’s Voting Proposal Rapped by State Solons,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 12 January 1962, 12.

⁵¹ “Stennis Blasts Proposed Voter Qualifications,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 29 January 1962, 1.

⁵² “Good Job,” *Hattiesburg American*, 14 May 1962, 16.

private correspondence to friends during the 1950s, Stennis had written in explicit terms about the importance of preventing Blacks from voting. He believed the entire social and political edifice of White supremacy depended on it. By the 1960s he would not put such views in writing, even in private correspondence. While fighting the anti-poll tax and literacy bills in speeches on the Senate floor in March of 1962, Stennis embraced a broader principle of protecting the franchise from the irresponsible masses. On 23 March, he argued that the poll tax instilled pride and responsibility in citizenship. Completely eliding the burden the tax put on the poor (itself an extremely racialized category in the Deep South), he contended that it was the “irresponsible, the indifferent, the careless, the shiftless, and the drifters” who neglected to pay the tax. In this sense the poll tax served as a test of the citizen’s commitment. If citizens could not be bothered to pay a small tax, they showed themselves unworthy of exercising the most sacred responsibility of citizenship. Stennis noted that he proudly saved his poll tax receipts for every single year he had paid them – a concrete testimony of his status as an upstanding citizen.⁵³

Three days later, Stennis made his argument more explicit. “I maintain that to have quality voting, to have responsibility in government, there must be some kind of regulation,” a “screening out of the irresponsible...who are not willing to fulfill their citizenship responsibilities.” He was intensely leery of “pressure groups” that were increasingly influencing public policy, and believed these groups were empowered by the trend toward more permissive voting rights.⁵⁴ As Stennis saw it, Americans increasingly

⁵³ *CR*, 87th Cong., 2nd sess., 23 March 1962, 4926-4927.

⁵⁴ But Stennis was not consistent in his defense of established voting practices. In fact, he flirted with a constitutional amendment to elect presidents by popular vote, or to assign electoral votes by congressional

voted to get what they could for themselves rather than as an exercise in responsible citizenship. “More and more...people have a direct interest in obtaining a check from the Federal Government,” Stennis worried. “Certainly, if we expect our representative form of Government to survive, we shall have to give more thought and serious attention to the quality of citizenship rather than trust only to luck and to the masses.”⁵⁵

In transforming his private priority of preventing Black voting into a public call for race-neutral elitism, Stennis could draw on a proud American tradition stretching back to the founders. The notion that the vote should be a privilege of the propertied or educated was well-established, as was suspicion of direct democracy that empowered common people.⁵⁶ Stennis framed his elitism as a simple desire to build a responsible citizenry: “I think the question of voting should carry some responsibilities with it. I do not know of any better training anywhere for any child, regardless of circumstance, color, or opportunities in life, than to teach him to carry responsibilities.” But instead of such training, America’s young people had their heads filled with collectivist notions about rights without responsibilities. “We are failing to teach them that every privilege carries

district. Not coincidentally, it was thought that either of these proposals would lessen the influence of “pressure groups” in presidential elections, leading to less aggressive civil rights legislation. *National Review* gave favorable coverage to this idea as well. See Henry Hazlitt, “Unrepresentative Government,” *National Review* 24 September 1960, 174-175.

⁵⁵ CR, 87th Cong., 2nd sess., 26 March 1962, 5011-5012.

⁵⁶ Such attitudes were deep-seated and not confined to the South. In an article decrying universal male suffrage, Francis Parkman, one of America’s preeminent 19th century historians, ridiculed “the masses” who “hug the flattering illusion that one man is essentially about as good as another.” Parkman argued that this was obviously not the case, and called for a revival of elite leadership to counteract the disturbing “effects of flinging the suffrage to the mob.” Francis Parkman, “The Failure of Universal Suffrage,” *The North American Review* 127 (1878): 1-20. See Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). See also, Smith, *Civic Ideals*.

with it a duty... We are getting off on the idea of mass action, mass virtues, the mass improvements, mass relief programs, and mass everything. We forget that, after all, the strength of a nation depends upon the individuals who are in it..."⁵⁷

Stennis's comments on voting exemplified at once his commitment to White supremacy and his attachment to a broader sense of conservatism. As his private letters indicate, there is no question that keeping Blacks from the ballot box was his primary concern. But it does not follow that praise of responsibility, individualism, and raising standards was smoke and mirrors. These beliefs were deeply held as well. After all, the voting restrictions Stennis supported had a long history of disenfranchising large numbers of poor Whites.⁵⁸ There is every reason to think Stennis considered this a feature rather than a bug. Precisely because his elitism and conservatism were so sincerely held, he was able to shift a fundamentally a racial concern into a broader discussion about the importance of individual responsibility and civic duty – themes of universal appeal.

The hard core of White supremacy at the center of Stennis's beliefs was revealed, not on the Senate floor, but in his posture toward his Black constituents in Mississippi. It appears that it was not until sometime in the 1970s that Stennis began to answer mail from Black constituents.⁵⁹ This is particularly striking because many of these

⁵⁷ Ibid., 5011-5012.

⁵⁸ After southern states enacted poll taxes and other disfranchisement measures in the 1890s and early twentieth century, turnout dropped precipitously, declining by an average of 37% across the South. This was not merely a function of Black disfranchisement, as White turnout is estimated to have fallen 26%. See J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 209-246.

⁵⁹ This is indicated by a review of Stennis's personal papers at Mississippi State University. See also, Chris Danielson, *After Freedom Summer: How Race Realigned Mississippi Politics, 1965-1986* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 199.

constituents, by taking it upon themselves to write to their representatives, were demonstrating precisely the sort of responsible citizenship Stennis claimed to desire. For example, in February 1960 the Mississippi State Conference of the NAACP wrote to Stennis: “We, the Negroes in Mississippi want to be first class citizens, and share the same responsibility in creating clean government as other people who are American citizens.” A handwritten note, scrawled on the letter by a member of Stennis’s staff, reads: “Senator has read this letter and it is to be retained and kept readily available during c.r. [civil rights] debate but no response will be made thereto.”⁶⁰

Mississippi Watershed: The Crisis at Ole Miss and the Road to the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Of all the battles Stennis had fought so far, perhaps none were as viscerally disturbing to him as the crisis at the University of Mississippi in the fall of 1962. James Meredith, a 29 year old Black man and native of Mississippi, applied to the University of Mississippi and was rejected. He filed a suit alleging racial discrimination, won, and was scheduled to enroll in the all-White university under protection of a federal court order in September, 1962. Governor Barnett and state education officials discussed the possibility of closing the university if necessary, while in Washington Stennis decried the “unwarranted encroachment and invasion of the authority of the State of Mississippi regarding our State education institutions.” The citizens of Mississippi, he warned, could not be held accountable “for any disorder resulting from such invaders who come in to

⁶⁰ Mississippi State Conference of the NAACP to John C. Stennis, 18 February 1960, Series 29, Box 7, Folder 16, JCS.

further agitate troubled relations which are already greatly strained.”⁶¹ Meredith attempted to enroll on 20 and 25 September and Governor Barnett personally turned him away in theatrical displays. On 26 September, 400 armed Mississippi police officers met Meredith to prevent his admission. On Sunday night, 30 September, amid heavy rioting by White Mississippians, thousands of federal troops occupied the campus and the town of Oxford. Two people were killed and hundreds injured. Meredith officially enrolled the following day. Declaring that he had no choice but to use force, President Kennedy put the blame squarely on Mississippi authorities. “Had the police powers of Mississippi been used to support the orders of the court, instead of deliberately blocking them...a peaceable and sensible solution would have been possible without any Federal intervention.”⁶²

Stennis’s enabling comments early in the crisis bore some responsibility as well, but he saw it quite differently. He said the huge numbers of federal soldiers constituted a deliberate attempt to “terrorize” the people of Mississippi for political gain. It was “ridiculous,” an “outrage” and “Un-Democratic and un-American and contrary to the spirit of the Constitution itself.”⁶³ He took particular offense at the use of Black troops in Oxford. On 2 October he wrote to Army Secretary Cyrus R. Vance, complaining that

⁶¹ James Saggus, “Barnett, College Board Discuss Meredith Today,” *Hattiesburg American*, 17 September 1962, 1; *CR*, 87th Cong., 2nd sess., 17 September 1962, 19569.

⁶² “The Mississippi Tragedy--What It All Means,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 15 October 1962, 39-42; “Riots, Death, Mark Violence at ‘Ole Miss’,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 October 1962, 1. For an overview of the crisis, see Frank Lambert, *The Battle of Ole Miss: Civil Rights v. States’ Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶³ Edgar Poe, “Occupation Force...Greater than Revolution Army,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 9 October 1962, 2; “Stennis Charges JFK ‘Terrorism’,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 9 October 1962, 8.

“colored troops” were “stopping and questioning...housewives and other citizens.” It was vital that “colored troops not be used in such a manner as will bring about possible conflict with the local citizens and further inflame an already dangerous situation.”⁶⁴

While Stennis implied Black troops were abusing their power, Richard Starnes of the *Washington Daily News* called the behavior of Black troops the “one small shred of decency” amid “a dismal panorama of hate and violence.”⁶⁵ If Stennis appeared close to losing his legendary composure, it may have been because the crisis was surprisingly personal. His own son, a member of the National Guard, had been called to duty.⁶⁶

In Mississippi, the supposed epicenter of racist backwardness, White Mississippians responded to this deeply disturbing event not with racist invective but with the broader language of conservatism. One man told Stennis he was “proud to be a citizen of the one state that is making a real stand – come what may – to protect for all Americans their constitution, liberty, state’s rights and way of life.” A Jackson man wrote, “Here again, as during the Civil War the Negro is not the true issue of this dispute. The tenth amendment to the Constitution gives to each state all rights not outlined in the Constitution and Mississippi is standing fast on this right in an attempt to slow or halt the taking over of ‘State Rights’ by a growing centralization of power in Washington.” Another man asked, “If the federal government can legally use the massive force we see at the University of Mississippi and in Oxford...where will this stop? Other states will

⁶⁴ John C. Stennis to Cyrus R. Vance, 2 October 1962, Series 29, Box 6, Folder 43, JCS.

⁶⁵ “Negro Troops Win Praise,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 October 1962, 1.

⁶⁶ “‘War’ in Mississippi Shames U.S. Abroad,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 October 1962, 21.

surely see and feel the force of federal power if it is not stopped...Let other states know the danger of the loss of a state's sovereignty."⁶⁷

The views of these ordinary Mississippians were echoed in mainstream and conservative media. In a column parroting Stennis, David Lawrence wrote, "There is nothing in the Constitution of the United States or in the laws passed by Congress which authorizes the use of Federal troops to compel any public educational institution to admit a certain student just because he demands that he be enrolled." The events at Ole Miss were nothing less than a symbol of "judicial tyranny" executed under the 14th amendment which had been, Lawrence argued, illegally adopted at bayonet point during Reconstruction. Meanwhile, his news magazine wrote that "tragedy struck" in Mississippi not when a Black man was denied his basic rights or when state officials defied federal law, but when the U.S. Army entered a sovereign state. The magazine claimed these events were causing Americans across the country to ask, "What power does the Federal Government possess, legally, to use military force against Americans?"⁶⁸ In the pages of *National Review*, while not vouching for Governor Barnett's behavior in particular, William F. Buckley lauded the larger principle for which he fought: "the *political* cause is admirable. It is the cause of home rule and it is the essence of the American system; and those in the United States who continue to honor the federal system must, though they despise the Barnetts of this world, feel a

⁶⁷ Dale Titler to John C. Stennis, Harold McDonald to John C. Stennis, 1 October 1962, Series 29 Box 6, Folder 19; Raiford G. Crews to John C. Stennis, 2 October 1962 Series 29, Box 6, Folder 19, all in JCS.

⁶⁸ David Lawrence, "High Court should rule on Fourteenth Amendment," *Hattiesburg American*, 2 October 1962, 10; "The Mississippi Tragedy--What It All Means," *U.S. News and World Report*, 15 October 1962, 39-42.

considerable sympathy” for this southern community standing against a runaway Supreme Court and federal power.⁶⁹

Of all the aftershocks of the Ole Miss crisis, the surging popularity of Governor Barnett presented the greatest personal threat to Stennis. There were rumors that the Governor, backed by the John Birch Society and key Citizens Council figures, would try to unseat Stennis when he came up for reelection in 1964.⁷⁰ Governor Barnett’s showy and calculated stand against Meredith’s admission had made him immensely popular among many White Mississippians. Stennis would thus spend more than a year under the cloud of a primary threat. Though he had yet to face a serious reelection challenge, his predicament in 1963 was a familiar one: even as he tried to appeal to a national audience he had to tend to a potential right-wing challenge back in Mississippi. Yet Stennis’s influence was greater than ever. He continued to advance in seniority on key committees and there were persistent rumors that he would fill a future vacancy on the Supreme Court.⁷¹ When a sensitive subject called for a special Senate investigation, Stennis was considered a natural candidate for the job because his colleagues trusted him to handle matters with dignity, fairness, and decorum.⁷²

As 1962 drew to a close, U.S. soldiers still occupied the University of Mississippi. It was hard for Stennis to imagine an outcome more extreme or unsettling. But in many

⁶⁹ William F. Buckley, “The Mess in Mississippi – An Afterword,” *National Review* 23 Oct 1962, 304.

⁷⁰ Ralph Hayes, “Governor to Ask Teacher-Pay Hike,” *Laurel Leader Call*, 6 October 1962, 4.

⁷¹ Steven Gerstel, “The Drama Nears in ‘Rights’ Filibuster,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 14 July 1963.

⁷² “Decorous Investigator: John Cornelius Stennis,” *New York Times*, 24 January 1962, 14.

ways 1963 would be even worse for him and the countermovement.⁷³ At the end of February President Kennedy called on Congress to pass a civil rights bill that would strengthen the referee provision of the 1960 act, provide federal aid to desegregating school districts, and extend the life of the civil rights commission created by the 1957 Civil Rights Act.⁷⁴ Meanwhile a voter registration campaign brought national attention to Greenwood, Mississippi. Greenwood was the largest town in a majority-Black county in which 92.5% of Whites were registered to vote compared to 1.9% of Blacks.⁷⁵ While Stennis complained of “outside agitators” leading “mob marches” in Greenwood, some Americans simply saw the arrests, police dogs, and intimidation as blatant denials of basic rights.⁷⁶

Events in Mississippi, however, were dwarfed by developments in Birmingham, Alabama. In April, Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference launched a desegregation campaign in the city. *National Review* called Birmingham “the latest port of call for that crew of professionals who spend their time rioting from city to city like a traveling crap game.”⁷⁷ Nonetheless, the violence that

⁷³ In 1963 alone, the justice department would tally 1,412 civil rights protests nationwide, the result of an unprecedented surge of activism driven by an increasingly militant and impatient grassroots. See Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

⁷⁴ Anthony Lewis, “Program is Broad: Kennedy Urges Speed on Ballot Suits – Asks School Aid,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1963, 1.

⁷⁵ “‘Mind on Freedom,’” *Newsweek*, 8 April 1963, 26. The best study of the events in Greenwood and the broader tradition of Black activism in Mississippi remains Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁷⁶ *CR*, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 2 April 1963, 5409-5410.

⁷⁷ “The Week,” *National Review*, 23 April 1963, 305.

ensued shocked the nation and dealt a huge blow to the countermovement. On the eve of the Birmingham campaign, when Gallup asked Americans to name the most important problem facing the country, only 4% said “racial problems.” By the beginning of October, after the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham left four Black girls dead, over half of Americans said racial problems were the greatest threat.⁷⁸

Events in Birmingham compelled President Kennedy to act. Once again, federal troops patrolled the streets of a southern city.⁷⁹ The nation’s conscience had been stricken not by the quiet daily work of racial oppression, but by the potent symbolism and media spectacle of an epithet spewing southern sheriff setting dogs upon children and attacking them with high pressure fire hoses.⁸⁰ In a nationwide address to the American people on 11 June, President Kennedy spoke in unprecedented terms about the nature of the civil rights struggle. “We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free.” Kennedy warned that it was time to act, or more violence would be on the way. Black demands had become so persistent that Congress could no longer safely ignore them.⁸¹ He urged Congress to act not only on the measures he had submitted at the

⁷⁸ Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Volume Three 1959-1971*, 1812, 1842.

⁷⁹ David Lawrence complained that Kennedy’s actions were “in direct...violation of the Constitution” and used a whole column to quote Stennis’s views on the subject. See David Lawrence, “Illegal Acts Breeding More and More Illegality,” *Hattiesburg American*, 24 May 1963, 12.

⁸⁰ “Birmingham, U.S.A.: ‘Look at Them Run,’” *Newsweek*, 13 May 1963, 27-28.

⁸¹ “Kennedy on Civil Rights,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1963, 141.

end of February, but to pass comprehensive legislation providing equal accommodations in public facilities and robust action on school desegregation, employment, and voting rights.⁸² In its basic outlines Kennedy's message would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Throughout 1963, pluralities or majorities of Americans said the Kennedy Administration was moving "too fast" on integration, and overwhelming majorities continued to say that civil rights demonstrations "hurt" the Black cause more than they helped.⁸³ Meanwhile a plurality of Whites nationwide claimed that Blacks in their community had "as good a chance" to get jobs as Whites. Large majorities believed Blacks in their community were, overall, treated "the same as whites." At the same time over three-quarters of White Americans said they "definitely" or "might" move if Blacks arrived in their neighborhood in large numbers. These schizophrenic responses (yes, Blacks are treated equally, and yes we would move if they came next door) reflected the ambivalence of an American public genuinely attached to a set of ideals the nation ostensibly stood for, but reluctant to think about the application of these ideals in localized and practical settings. Americans wanted the deeply unsettling violence in

⁸² "Text of the President's Message to Congress Calling for Civil Rights Legislation," *New York Times*, 20 June 1963, 16; Tom Wicker, "Kennedy Asks Broad Rights Bill as 'Reasonable' Course in Crisis; Calls for Restraint by Negroes," *New York Times*, 20 June 1963, 1.

⁸³ *National Review's* characterization of the civil rights movement's tactics was particularly harsh. The magazine editorialized, "The movement's methods have been invidious, divisive, hurtful; but even worse, follow from the essentially racist attitude that regards all things first in terms of black or white." To call the civil rights movement not just misguided but racist was astonishing in light of the magazine's insistence that White southerners should not be thought of as racists. See "The Week," *National Review*, 5 May 1964, 341.

Birmingham, in particular, to end. But the deep roots of injustice from which the violence sprang continued to be underappreciated.⁸⁴

Attuned to this sentiment, Stennis saw the push for a civil rights bill as a sort of mania driven by the sense of crisis street violence produced. He decried “The great wave of emotion which has been sweeping the country” and complained that it was “resulting in the administration apparently giving the Negro race a signed blank check.” If this wave of emotionalism were not reigned in, it could “well cause our entire system of government to crumble.”⁸⁵ In the face of this mortal threat, Stennis retained reason for hope. There was as yet little evidence that Americans were profoundly offended by the local, quiet, and persistent nationwide practices that undergirded White supremacy and privilege. When most White Americans thought of granting Blacks civil rights, it is likely they imagined the cessation of cruelty in a far-off southern town like Greenwood. It did not imply a widespread urge for nationwide changes in housing, education, and employment policy that would transform the character of northern communities in fundamentally equalizing ways.

Not only was there little evidence for a great moral awakening of the American people, Stennis and his countermovement allies had reason to believe public sentiment was trending in their direction. Matching the polls saying Americans thought the administration was moving too fast on civil rights, a new term entered the political lexicon: “white backlash.” Quite suddenly, in the second half of 1963, this phrase became

⁸⁴ Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Volume Three 1959-1971*, 1823-1833.

⁸⁵ *CR*, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 28 June 1963, 11998.

ubiquitous in national media.⁸⁶ The *Washington Post* reported that northern senators who backed the civil rights bill were becoming increasingly worried. “For the first time,” an unnamed Democratic Senator said, “I’m getting mail from white people saying ‘Wait a minute, we’ve got some rights too.’ The cloakroom talk in the Senate is that this is true in every northern state.” A Republican Senator agreed. He reported that one of his constituents “said his sister had paid \$22,000 for a house and then a Negro family moved in next door. His sister has cried and cried ever since, he said.” These developments, said another Senator, have “scared the hell out of all politicians in the North.”⁸⁷

That did not deter civil rights activists from keeping up the pressure throughout the summer of 1963, culminating in the March on Washington on 28 August. Stennis received a VIP invitation to the event, but declined to respond, much less attend.⁸⁸ The march appalled him. He believed the potential for violence was high, and said that anti-democratic forces were pressuring the Senate to legislate under duress and intimidation.⁸⁹ Stennis’s perspective was widely shared across the country, a fact often lost in contemporary nostalgia fifty years after the march. An August Gallup poll found that nearly two-thirds of those who had heard of the march disapproved of it.⁹⁰ In the halls of

⁸⁶ A search of the phrase “white backlash” in the Newspaper Archive, a database of hundreds of local newspapers and AP news stories, finds two usages of the term in the first nine years after *Brown v Board of Education*. The same search for 1963 and 1964 delivers over 3,700 returns.

⁸⁷ Chalmers M. Roberts, “Wary is Attitude of Politicians on Civil Rights Question,” *Lawrence Journal World*, 28 October 1963, 10.

⁸⁸ R.S.V.P. Card for March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Series 29, Box 4, Folder 47, JCS.

⁸⁹ *CR*, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 11 July 1963, 12436.

⁹⁰ Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Volume Three 1959-1971*, 1836.

power there was a palpable sense that self-preservation, if nothing else, required legislative action.⁹¹ Congress fitfully moved to debate Kennedy's proposals, but for the duration of 1963 gridlock prevailed. Then, President Kennedy's shocking assassination at the end of November upset the political calculus. Lyndon Johnson, consummate political animal that he was, allowed little time for grief. He attempted to leverage Kennedy's death to compel passage of the Civil Rights Act, giving it the standing of a martyr's cause.⁹²

For Stennis and the countermovement the task at hand during the fight over the Civil Rights Act in 1964 was to stem the tide of emotion and dissipate the sense of crisis. If they could convincingly tie changes in the South to changes in the North, they would have a chance to win. They would have to block and filibuster and impede until average White Americans had time to think better of giving up their race-based advantages. In the meantime, Stennis and others did their utmost to keep resistance in the hands of responsible elites who, unlike Bull Connor in Birmingham, would avoid the kind of emotional spectacles that gave fuel to the civil rights fire. President Kennedy had framed civil rights as a crisis in particular because of the potential for violence and disorder on the streets and because of the unyielding insistence of Black demands. These conditions

⁹¹ Missouri Representative Richard Bolling, a key civil rights supporter in the House, argued that the failure to pass a bill would lead to bloodshed and "wreck" the country. "Solon Urges Civil Rights Act to Avoid 'Bloodshed,'" *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, 4 November 1963, 5.

⁹² E.W. Kenworthy, "President Speaks: Tells Governors He'll Press Civil Rights," *New York Times*, 26 November 1963, 1. For background on the Kennedy Administration's civil rights intentions and the political uses Lyndon Johnson made of Kennedy's death, see Mark Stern, *Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

would eventually pass. And when they did, it was not at all clear that the eradication of racism would be granted high priority by the American people.

As Black militancy became more pronounced in 1964, *Life* Magazine lectured the civil rights movement for allowing its cause to be “imperiled by a rising tide of irresponsibility.” But the very next paragraph betrayed the true concern of moderate White opinion. The thing that struck fear into the hearts of average Whites was not so much more militant tactics, but the target of those tactics: “The Negro pressure has shifted from the obvious indecencies of the South (back-of-the-bus seating, segregation of schools, etc.) to the complicated second-stage frustrations of joblessness, ghetto housing, poor schools and poverty.”⁹³ Southern White supremacy, it was understood, was full of “obvious indecencies.” Northern White supremacy was merely a series of “complicated...frustrations.” This framing of the civil rights struggle expressed a deep discomfort with Black goals that the countermovement could hope to capitalize upon. The possibility of erasing the North-South distinction in White Americans’ minds and nationalizing the countermovement seemed tantalizingly close.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964

As President Lyndon Johnson grabbed the reins of power it quickly became clear that he would do everything he could to force passage of the Civil Rights Act. On 10 February 1964, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the bill by a vote of 290-130. The measure outlawed racial discrimination in employment and public

⁹³ “Responsible Tactics Will Win Rights Sooner,” *Life*, 1 May 1964, 4.

accommodations, and authorized the Attorney General to initiate school desegregation suits, providing a mechanism to finally quicken the crawling pace of desegregation. But as two decades of efforts to pass civil rights legislation had shown, the House was always going to be the easy part. No one knew with any certainty if Senate leaders would be able to muster the votes necessary to achieve cloture against a southern filibuster. The Senate was poised for the biggest civil rights battle of the twentieth century.⁹⁴

In the year between Kennedy's proposed civil rights legislation and its final passage as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and particularly during the epic filibuster stretching through April, May, and June, 1964, Stennis aggressively attacked it on the Senate floor. Many of his arguments were broadly similar to those he had been crafting for sixteen years, but the stakes had never been higher, nor the pressures more intense. As a result, the 1964 civil rights struggle showcased the full range of his rhetoric in a way that no other event could. By invoking freedom of association, private property rights, law and order, limited federal power, and individualism, Stennis sought to win over northern and western senators whose broader sense of conservatism made them ambivalent on the civil rights bill. He was aware of the unsettled nature of White opinion throughout the country. The full extent and implications of a "white backlash" were as yet unclear, but he made a calculated attempt to appeal to it with his rhetoric.

He did so by defending a vision of American society that subtly entrenched incumbent (White) interests. He titled his first speech against the civil rights proposals,

⁹⁴ When Johnson's political advisers urged him not to spend his political capital on a cause so uncertain as civil rights, Johnson is said to have replied, "Well, what the hell's the presidency for?" Quoted in Robert Caro, *The Passage of Power* (New York: Knopf, 2012), xv. E.W. Kenworthy, "Civil Rights Bill Passed by House in 290-130 Vote; Hard Senate Fight Seen," *New York Times*, 11 February 1964, 1. For a legislative history of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, see Finley, *Delaying the Dream*, 247-280.

“Freedom in Reverse,” a designation with little logic apart from the sense that granting freedom to Blacks meant taking it away from Whites.⁹⁵ Indeed, in one of his most consistent turns of phrase throughout the year, he argued that the bill would “take away rights from one group...and would give them as privileges to members of another group.” In Stennis’s rhetoric, Whites invariably had rights, while Black attempts to secure those same rights were grasps for special privileges. He communicated this without explicitly identifying the race of the respective groups. Stennis resented the basic premises on which civil rights bills were based. Rejecting the idea that the United States systematically disadvantaged certain groups, he charged that the Civil Rights Act would actually institute such discrimination for the first time. He believed that civil rights bills transformed a level playing field in which “rights...belong to all of us regardless of color, religion, or any other designation” into a balkanized society with privileged groups and special rights belonging to some and not to others.⁹⁶ Framing the issue in this way allowed Stennis to grasp the moral high ground. By claiming the colorblind ideal as a present reality, he portrayed race-conscious policy designed to mitigate racial discrimination as a counterproductive threat to basic American ideals. This sensibility would become a powerful component of the nationwide conservative turn on racial issues in the coming decades.

Stennis advanced this thinking in his attack on Title VII, the part of the bill that would create a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity modeled on the F.E.P.C.

⁹⁵ *CR*, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 11 July 1963, 12429.

⁹⁶ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 17 April 1964, 8292.

The proposal was designed to address the problem of systematic exclusion of minority groups from labor markets. Stennis ignored this context and focused on the prospect of an individual employer being “forced” to hire specific individuals. There was no substantial difference, he said, between this coercion of the employer and an employee being required to work for someone. Either one amounted to “involuntary servitude.” He warned that business owners who wanted to stay out of trouble would have to adopt a “quota system.”⁹⁷ Throughout 1964 he used “quota” as a rhetorical device meant to convey the obvious flaws of the bill. As future decades would reveal, many Americans shared Stennis’s preference for looking at employment through a highly individualistic lens, resisting attempts to grapple with the larger context of racially exclusionary labor networks.

Stennis was particularly disturbed by Title II, the part of the bill that would require privately owned establishments that served the public, such as restaurants and hotels, to stop discriminating on the basis of race. For Stennis, this had nothing to do with enabling Black Americans to be full participants in the life and economy of the nation. The threat to private property and freedom of association was the real issue. The bill would prevent business owners from conducting their business as they saw fit and would “destroy the God-given right of individuals to choose and select those with whom they

⁹⁷ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 21 April 1964, 8634. Stennis made this point much more mildly than some of his allies. *U.S. News & World Report* published an article from a former Special Deputy Attorney General of New York arguing that the public accommodations portion of the bill was akin to slavery—*White slavery*: “It is one of the most compelling ironies of history to find that, in 1964, Negroes are demanding laws to compel whites to serve them in the very same occupations which they themselves were freed from serving whites in 1864, and demanding this under the name of ‘freedom.’” Alfred Avins, “Maybe It’s Time To Look At The Antislavery Amendment,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 11 May 1964, 82-84.

would associate.” Stennis insisted this was not about race. After all, the bill could “destroy a colored man’s business” just as well, by allowing “rowdy white people” to drive Black customers away. The rights of property and freedom of association were not segregationist principles; they were fundamental American beliefs that “constitute the primary distinction between the American system of government and the Communist philosophy of an all-powerful police and slave state.”⁹⁸ While delivered in race-neutral terms, Stennis’s argument ignored the disparities of power that “freedom of association” both reflected and reproduced. By denying Blacks full inclusion in national life, Stennis effectively made freedom of association and property rights special privileges of Whiteness.

The debate over the Civil Rights Act played out against the backdrop of ongoing civil rights demonstrations and the impending “Freedom Summer” in Mississippi. Stennis always called the campaign “the invasion.” He warned that if Congress were to “bow down to the demand of civil rights extremists” it would establish the precedent of concessions via the threat of violence.⁹⁹ He revisited his amendment making it a federal crime to cross state lines for the purpose of breaking a state law. It was a transparent attempt to stop Freedom Summer in its tracks and it was easily defeated.¹⁰⁰ Stennis desperately cast about for a means of tamping down the surging grassroots activism.

⁹⁸ CR, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 11 July 1963, 12431-12435. David Lawrence agreed. He wrote, “What we are witnessing in America is the unreasoned attitude of an impatient mob....The right to freedom of association is well defined... Human associations cannot be dictated by law. They must evolve naturally and on the basis of individual behavior and achievement.” David Lawrence, “Ten Tragic Years,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 25 May 1964, 119-120.

⁹⁹ CR, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 7 April 1964, 7070-7071.

¹⁰⁰ CR, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 12 June 1964, 13641-13669.

There was a clear strategic calculation in his effort. He defined racial progress by the presence or absence of outward disorder and violence. He only demanded surface-level tranquility and understood that millions of White Americans felt much the same. If the violence of recent months could be avoided, the sense of crisis would dissolve and the pressure to pass a strong bill would dissipate.¹⁰¹ In early May he gave a speech criticizing the dozens of cross burnings that had recently occurred in Mississippi. “I hope that those responsible are not doing it in the belief that they are helping to defeat the civil rights bill now before the Senate. If so, they are very much mistaken in this belief. Such actions can only hurt us...in our efforts to defeat this bill.”¹⁰² A month later he wrote to a friend that he was doing his best to “keep down the cross-burning incidents” because such activities were likely to provoke an “extreme” response from the federal government and damage Mississippi’s reputation.¹⁰³

The brightest thread running through all of Stennis’s arguments was his concern about the seemingly inexorable growth of federal power. The provisions of the bill that would limit the use of jury trials in various civil rights cases particularly upset him. He continued to ignore and deny the context of jury discrimination in the South, and treated

¹⁰¹ *National Review* perfectly encapsulated this sentiment in the summer of 1964: “whatever is at stake in what is now called the civil rights movement, whatever the merits of the cry of our Negro fellow-citizens for justice, there is even more at stake in the matter of mob frenzy and violence in our streets. Unless there is order in the streets, unless citizens may go peacefully about their business on the public highways and there be secure in their persons, property, homes and place of business, we no longer have a nation or society at all; we have returned to anarchy...” This exposed the fundamental hypocrisy of White opinion. The status quo *National Review* thought so important to preserve was one in which Blacks were *not* free to “go peacefully about their business...” See “The Thin Blue Line,” *National Review*, 11 August 1964, 679.

¹⁰² Speech to Delta Council, Cleveland, Mississippi, 7 May 1964, Series 49, Box 10, Folder 28, JCS.

¹⁰³ John C. Stennis to Jack W. Reed, 1 June 1964, Series 29, Box 4, Folder 49, JCS.

the proposal as part of a broader trend to “Take government away from the people and move it all the way to Washington, where it will permanently remain to grow and fester, never to be returned to the people themselves.”¹⁰⁴ Through it all, Stennis retained his sense of humor even as he lamented what he considered to be his country’s decline. One day on the Senate floor, Senator Sparkman asked Stennis, “The Senator from Mississippi has studied constitutional law, has he not?” Stennis replied, “Yes; but, unfortunately, most of the constitutional law I learned has since then been repealed.”¹⁰⁵

Stennis remained firmly convinced that Americans favored civil rights bills in the abstract, but rejected them when they learned the details of their content.¹⁰⁶ The astonishing events beyond the Senate floor in the spring of 1964 lent support to this supposition. While the Senate filibuster droned on, Alabama Governor George Wallace, famous as the man who had stood in the schoolhouse door for the benefit of the cameras, went north to challenge the sitting president in the Democratic primaries. He had announced his candidacy for the presidency in the beginning of March, and the media shrugged. A month later, he shocked elite opinion by winning over a third of Democratic voters in Wisconsin’s 7 April primary. A month later in Indiana, Wallace repeated his feat. The following week in Maryland, Wallace nearly won an outright majority of

¹⁰⁴ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 19 May 1964, 11286.

¹⁰⁵ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 7 April 1964, 7084.

¹⁰⁶ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 20 Mar 1964, 5800.

Democratic voters.¹⁰⁷ This, it seemed, was the “white backlash” in tangible form. Wallace’s behavior as governor had given him the reputation of a demagogue, and he possessed a populist appeal to which Stennis was neither temperamentally nor ideologically suited. Nevertheless, Wallace ventured north with tried and true countermovement rhetoric in his back pocket. He warned of the “unnatural and unhealthy accumulation of power in the hands of an all-powerful central bureaucracy.”¹⁰⁸ His campaign became a media sensation and contributed to a sense that the events in the Senate were racing against broader developments in the nation. Which would arrive first: passage of the Civil Rights Act, or a full-fledged White response that would kill the bill?¹⁰⁹

While strange political currents swirled outside the Senate, Stennis continued his defense inside it. Remarkably, the most fulsome defense he ever gave on the Senate floor of racial segregation as a near-biological imperative occurred in 1964. On 20 March, Stennis delivered a major address against the civil rights bill. Toward the end of his remarks the leader of the civil rights forces in the Senate, Hubert Humphrey, engaged Stennis in debate. Humphrey pointed out the contradictions in the South’s system of segregation. Stennis brushed his objections aside by implying the South’s social relations

¹⁰⁷ “Wallace Claims ‘Victory’ With Large Vote,” *The Daily Telegram*, 8 April 1964, 1; Eugene J. Cadou, “Wallace Polls 31 Percent of Indiana’s Democratic Ballots,” *Tipton Tribune*, 1; “George Wallace Scores Big,” *Morning Herald*, 20 May 1964, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 205. For more background on Wallace’s campaign, see Carter, 204-215.

¹⁰⁹ *U.S. News & World Report* warned, “A white resentment against Negro demands and Negro demonstrations, disclosed by votes gathered in the North by Governor Wallace, is proving to be very real and is growing.” “What Wallace Vote Proved in North,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 June 1964, 29-31.

were almost primordial. If Humphrey could not “understand some of the basic relations that occur in human nature” then Stennis could not explain it to him. These nature-rooted patterns could not be dealt with via law. As though aware of the delicate ground he tread, Stennis said, “I have an illustration that I will not give now, but I shall be glad to discuss it further with the Senator some time.” Yet a few minutes later, after Humphrey challenged him further, Stennis went ahead with his illustration. He had recently heard of a little girl in kindergarten who was doing well academically but having trouble relating to her classmates socially. The teacher told the mother that when the class played house the little girl refused to play the role of the mother because a little Black boy was playing the role of the father. “Something came up in the little girl’s mind so that she did not want that to happen.” For Stennis, this was not a story of prejudice handed down to the next generation. It was a window into human nature. “The greatest segregationists are...the mothers of this country—the mothers of these little girls...I cannot adequately explain these things, but I know life.”¹¹⁰ This was an astonishing story from a man who staked his career on submerging the importance of race. It is not clear why, after seventeen years in the Senate, Stennis spoke in such terms. But what is clear is that the remarks were unprepared and occurred amid the pressures of debate with Hubert Humphrey.

There were no other comparable incidents during the civil rights debate that year. Stennis regained his composure and transmuted his racial ideas about the nature of human inequality and group difference into a robust defense of race-neutral

¹¹⁰ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 20 March 1964, 5816.

individualism, effort, and personal responsibility. He framed this as the opposite of what the civil rights movement stood for, as if fighting discrimination against groups necessarily diminished individual responsibility. “What this country needs,” Stennis declared, “is more emphasis on doing one’s best and trying to improve one’s training, mind and body, in order to make a better living and to make something of one’s self for his family and his country, rather than to have the agitation that a person is being mistreated and discriminated against.”¹¹¹ This sentiment became commonplace among Whites in the post-civil rights movement era, but it is remarkable that Stennis already embraced it in 1964, amid contexts of pervasive and systemic oppression. Rather than concentrating on alleged discrimination, Stennis believed Blacks should focus on making the most of their ample opportunities. Denying the accusation that equal opportunity was lacking in the United States and in his state in particular, Stennis said, “According to my observations, the opportunities of the colored people are just as great as their capacity to use them.”¹¹²

The day before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Stennis delivered his closing argument:

[A] long and difficult struggle [produced] many of the rights and guarantees which we enjoy today...the right to acquire, use, and enjoy property as one sees fit, and the right of an individual to choose his own associates...The philosophy behind this bill reverses and renounces these common law principles...It will stifle individual initiative, discourage free enterprise and all but extinguish the bold and adventurous pioneer spirit which has helped to make this Nation great.... Let us not destroy the individual and his chance to grow and develop under our system, regardless of color.

¹¹¹ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 3 April 1964, 6830.

¹¹² *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 3 April 1964, 6840.

Now we have blown out the light. We have closed the door. We have made the state supreme.¹¹³

This powerful conclusion encapsulated the themes of Stennis's career. His limited-government and individualist rhetoric could be seen as a smokescreen, mere subterfuge for White supremacy. But such interpretations miss the full import of his rhetoric. Black demands for full citizenship *did* challenge traditional American governing norms and implied unsettling changes in the nation's social contract. As he had shown throughout his career, Stennis did not need to name White supremacy to defend it, precisely because it was so intimately embedded in American society. In such a context, freedom of association and individualism were, at once, appealing American principles and supports for White supremacy.

Later that same day, Senator Barry Goldwater rose on the floor of the Senate to officially announce his opposition to the final bill. He began by declaring his unwavering opposition to racial discrimination of any kind. He believed he had proved the sincerity of this conviction throughout his life. Integration was a moral good, and racial discrimination was wrong. He had demonstrated his willingness to support civil rights legislation by voting for the civil rights acts of 1957 and 1960. But the current racial troubles were "fundamentally a matter of the heart" that "can never be cured by laws alone." A carefully crafted law could help, but it would not in itself solve the problem. Goldwater's moral convictions and support for moderate civil rights legislation set him apart from Stennis in obvious ways. But the differences were not as significant as they

¹¹³ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 18 June 1964, 14285.

may first appear. After stating his moral sensibilities, Goldwater pivoted to the reasons he could not support the bill, and these arguments bore an astonishing resemblance to the narratives John Stennis had been weaving for nearly two decades.¹¹⁴

Goldwater's first argument was procedural. He contended that consideration of the bill occurred in a highly emotional and inflammatory context that endangered calm consideration of basic constitutional issues. The proponents were using "sledgehammer tactics" based on "emotion and political pressures." This was an odd claim for a bill that had witnessed a record-breaking amount of Senate debate amid the longest filibuster in history. But it was not a new claim. The notion that civil rights bills in particular were emotional and politically fraught subjects that clouded legislators' judgment was advanced by Stennis as early as 1948 while fighting Truman's civil rights program. By implying that the Civil Rights Act was based more on sordid political imperatives than constitutional principles, Goldwater adopted longstanding countermovement narratives about the inherent crassness of Black political interests.¹¹⁵

In contrast to Stennis, Goldwater could have supported a civil rights bill. But the price of his support would have been steep indeed. He demanded that title II and title VII, dealing with public accommodations and employment, respectively, be stripped from the bill. It was a call for the heart of the bill to be removed. These were also the aspects of the bill that southern senators found most objectionable. Without title II and title VII, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would have been another relatively toothless and incremental

¹¹⁴ *CR*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 18 June 1964, 14318-14319.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

measure in the tradition of the civil rights acts of 1957 and 1960. But for Goldwater, federal toothlessness and incrementalism was the feature rather than the bug. He declared that there was “no constitutional basis for the exercise of Federal regulatory authority” in employment or public accommodations, and found “the attempted usurpation of such power to be a grave threat to the very essence of our basic system of government; namely, that of a constitutional republic in which 50 sovereign States have reserved to themselves and to the people those powers not specifically granted to the Central or Federal Government.” In this bold and unequivocal statement of the primacy of the 10th amendment and states’ rights, Goldwater matched the most expansive claims of Stennis.¹¹⁶

Goldwater claimed that federal action against discrimination in public accommodations and employment required a constitutional amendment. This was a useful argument because it expressed openness to proposed changes if only they were achieved through the proper channels. Stennis had often used the same strategy. Both men realized that constitutional amendments were so difficult to achieve that they were essentially a dead end. Goldwater seemed to sincerely believe that passing the bill would be a hammer blow to the Constitution itself. He warned it would set the nation on a path that “could ultimately destroy the freedom of all American citizens, including the freedoms of the very persons whose feelings and whose liberties are the major subject of this legislation.” Though coming from a different moral starting point, Goldwater arrived at the same conclusion as Stennis: by blocking civil rights legislation he protected the

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

freedom of all Americans. Moreover, he claimed that he acted in the interest of Blacks. It was a resounding echo of Stennis's claims, as early as 1948, that civil rights legislation would backfire in ways that would harm Blacks most of all.¹¹⁷

As Goldwater neared the end of his speech, the remarkable parallels with Stennis's rhetoric increased. Throughout his career Stennis had downplayed explicit racial paranoia, even as his rhetoric heightened a sense of suspicion toward the supposed tyrannies of the federal government that were just over the horizon. Goldwater embraced a similar ethos that saw potential threats to liberty as more dangerous than present violations of it. In doing so, he concocted elaborate worst case scenarios of a post-apocalyptic America that brought to mind Maoist China or Soviet Russia. Goldwater charged that simple enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would require "the creation of a Federal police force of mammoth proportions." It would produce in the public an "informer psychology" with "neighbors spying on neighbor," leading to all "the hallmarks of the police state and landmarks in the destruction of a free society." Though Stennis and Goldwater differed on the morality of integration, both united around the claim that achieving racial progress through federal legislation would come at the cost of basic American freedoms.¹¹⁸

The conclusion of Goldwater's speech echoed the basic argument on which Stennis had based his career. Goldwater may have been a more credible messenger, but the message itself was the same:

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

My concern extends beyond this single legislative moment. My concern extends beyond any single group in our society. My concern is for the entire Nation, for the freedom of all who live in it and for all who will be born into it. It is the general welfare that must be considered now, not just the special appeals for special welfare. This is the time to attend to the liberties of all. This is my concern. And this is where I stand.¹¹⁹

The import of the moment was clear. As Goldwater concluded his speech his liberal Republican colleague from New York, Senator Jacob Javits, said, “Barry, this is a dreadful mistake. It’s tragic. I’m just sick about it, Barry. I can’t tell you how distressed I am.”¹²⁰

Goldwater voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Mississippi swooned. This was not a sign of White Mississippians’ ignorance. They were well aware that Goldwater disapproved of their moral sensibilities. But they judged, correctly, that it did not matter. The key distinction between the rhetoric of Goldwater and Stennis in 1964 was Goldwater’s unequivocal assertion that integration was morally good. Yet for Stennis’s purposes it was a distinction without a difference. It mattered not whether Goldwater’s racial convictions were opposed to Stennis’s, as long as he upheld limited-government conservatism as the highest good. He spoke for a growing constituency of White Americans that would increasingly come to believe that the federal government was causing more racial problems than it was solving. As personally horrified by racism as he was blind to its social power, Goldwater was a fitting emblem for a movement that would declare victory over America’s ancient ills and sound the call for federal retreat in

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ John J Lindsay, “Civil Rights Bill: ‘It Will Not Be Denied,’” *Newsweek*, 29 June 1964, 17.

subsequent decades. It was the very retreat for which Stennis had fought his whole career.

The ascendancy of colorblind conservatism was at hand.

Epilogue

The Legacy of John C. Stennis

A month after the senate passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Stennis prepared a memo detailing the reasons he and his colleagues were unable to stop it. He credited President Johnson's leadership, the political pressures of an election year, the influence of religious groups, and the surprisingly good impression made by the March on Washington. Most of all, he blamed the self-defeating dynamics of White southern resistance. He believed the church bombing in Birmingham that killed four girls, as well as other violent incidents, "built up a tremendous amount of public sentiment against the South." Blatant voting discrimination also presented a serious problem. There were whole counties in the Deep South that "did not have a single negro registered... We could answer other charges far better than we could this one."¹ Though Stennis had attempted to moderate White southern resistance, its internal contradictions were too great to withstand a concentrated assault on the old order of White supremacy.

Stennis's measured rhetoric could not sustain a social system suffering a catastrophic loss of legitimacy. His words were too disconnected from the ground-level extremism and violence for which he offered a de facto defense. But as Stennis contemplated his defeat in 1964, he might have failed to fully appreciate the extent to

¹ "Permanent Memorandum on Cloture Vote and Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill," 19 July 1964, Series 29, Box 3, Folder 14, JCS.

which the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act the following year, would liberate him and endow countermovement arguments with new force. Stennis's appeals for limited government and colorblind policy could not carry the day in the face of violence, state-sponsored discrimination, and blatant vote suppression. But what if the violence ended? What if public spaces became nominally integrated? What if Blacks registered to vote in large numbers? Freed from the defense of particularly southern forms of oppression, longstanding countermovement rhetoric was poised to go mainstream and national in unprecedented ways.

The conservative forces gathering around the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater would provide one of the vehicles of that national transmission. In the election of 1964 he secured the Republican nomination and went on to win the core states from which the countermovement had emanated for decades, becoming the first Republican to win the Deep South since Reconstruction. Yet he did so while being routed nationally. In the wake of Lyndon Johnson's crushing victory, the media asked if the "white backlash" narrative was overblown. The sudden discovery of the term in 1963 had conveyed the sense that White resistance was angry, ignorant, and almost inscrutable. Where had it come from? It was as if it was an inchoate force of nature with impenetrable origins. Then, as now, the reliance on such charged language reflected an unwillingness to take the goals and influence of the White countermovement seriously. The failure of a "backlash" to materialize in the 1964 election made it easy to believe the moment of White rage had passed, if indeed it had ever existed. Future decades would put 1964 in a different light. A "backlash" may not have arrived that year, but such terms trivialized

what was occurring in American society and politics. New political forces were increasingly merging with traditional countermovement influences, with profound consequences for the future of America's political economy and social contract.

Nowhere was this clearer than education policy. When the politics of school integration throughout the country dramatically turned in the early 1970s, what came as a shock to much elite opinion was no surprise to John C. Stennis.² He had always believed that what united White Americans was much greater than what divided them. The comprehensive nationwide resistance to federal efforts to eradicate racial inequality in American education was nothing less than a vindication of his longstanding beliefs. Stennis was at the center of the counterattack, stoking it with legislation demanding that the same standard of integration be applied nationwide. He was quietly confident that White Americans would not tolerate meaningful integration and would relieve the White South before submitting to the same treatment.³ When Jimmy Carter embraced Stennis on the campaign trail in 1976 even as Stennis reaffirmed his belief in segregation, it was

² The *New York Times* wrote that "something very deep and basic" was changing "in the long struggle to make the American creed work for black people." Tom Wicker called it "The Death of Integration." See "'Deep and Basic' Reversal on Rights," *New York Times*, 22 February 1970, E1; Tom Wicker, "In the Nation: The Death of Integration," *New York Times*, 19 February 1970, 46.

³ After introducing his amendment to force equal integration efforts nationwide, Stennis suddenly began receiving hundreds of appreciative letters from all over the country. His belief in the essential unity of White Americans in the preservation of their racial privileges was vindicated. For letters to Stennis, see Series 53, Box 18, JCS. See also, Joseph Crespino, "The Best Defense Is a Good Offense: The Stennis Amendment and the Fracturing of Liberal School Desegregation Policy, 1964-1972," *Journal of Policy History* 18 (2006): 304-325.

a powerful indicator of the need national political figures felt to appeal to Whites who wanted to preserve as much of the old order as possible.⁴

A perusal of the present-day educational landscape puts Stennis's success in stark relief. In his home county of Kemper, the public schools have become synonymous with Black schools, while Whites embrace private education. Though Whites constitute 35% of the population of Kemper County, they make up only 2% of public school enrollment in the county.⁵ Nationwide, schools are now more segregated than at any time since the late 1960s, a dynamic that appears to have only grown worse since the Supreme Court put further limits on desegregation in 2007.⁶ Three-quarters of Black and Hispanic students now attend schools in which less than half the students are White, and 15% of Black students attend schools that have essentially no White enrollment. The effects, in the form of inadequate resources and concentrated poverty, are severe.⁷ These White supremacist outcomes are often seen as benign features of the landscape, standard facts of

⁴ James T. Wooten, "Carter Accepts Help of Stennis, Eastland," *New York Times*, 18 September 1976, 16; "Mr. Carter Toes the Line," *New York Times*, 21 September 1976, 36.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey, <http://factfinder2.census.gov>; Federal Education Budget Project, New America Foundation, <http://febp.newamerica.net/k12/MS/2802310>, accessed 23 January 2014.

⁶ Dana N. Thompson Dorsey, "Segregation 2.0: The New Generation of School Segregation in the 21st Century," *Education and Urban Policy* 45 (2013): 533-547. There are numerous case studies demonstrating the prevalence of resegregation across the country. See for example, Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob L. Vigdor, "School Segregation Under Color-blind Jurisprudence: The Case of North Carolina," *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law* 16 (2008): 46-86, and Emilye Crosby, "White Privilege, Black Burden: Lost Opportunities and Deceptive Narratives in School Desegregation in Claiborne County, Mississippi," *The Oral History Review* 39 (2012): 258-285. For a brief overview of the crucial role of residential segregation in American education, see Richard Rothstein, "Why Our Schools Are Segregated," *Educational Leadership* (2013): 50-55.

⁷ Gary Orfield, John Kucsera, and Genevieve Siegel Hawley, "E Pluribus...Separation: Deepening Double Segregation for More Students," September 2012, The Civil Rights Project, The University of California. <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu>, accessed 22 January 2014.

American life that are all but invisible to many Whites. But their origins are not impenetrable. In reality, modern-day inequalities are logical outcomes of the assumptions and priorities John C. Stennis brought to the fight over civil rights sixty years ago.

The civil rights movement was not foreordained to succeed, or to place the boundaries of change precisely where it did. The society that emerged out of the civil rights era was a negotiated outcome, the result of both the victories and the defeats of the civil rights movement. For too long in the popular imagination, only one side of that ledger has commonly been noted. Through figures like John Stennis, the countermovement won significant victories and shaped the course of American society through the rest of the twentieth century and beyond. In the decades after the high water mark of the civil rights movement, under the overwhelming pressure of bipartisan White opinion, it was not only education policy that trended in Stennis's direction. Efforts to combat employment discrimination were rolled back, while housing segregation stubbornly receded at only a glacial pace.⁸ Meanwhile, tough on crime policies produced devastating impacts on Black communities, and wealth disparities remained entrenched.⁹

Celebration of segregation's demise has been incorporated into the nation's political culture and Americans' sense of themselves as a freedom loving people. This is made easier by emphasizing the pathetic end of vanquished demagogues. But figures like

⁸ For a recent treatment of the ongoing devastating effects of housing segregation, see Patrick Sharkey, *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁹ On crime and incarceration, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012). See also Glenn C. Loury, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values* (Boston: MIT Press, 2008). For an analyses of the persistent wealth gap, see Thomas M. Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Stennis upset these simple narratives. The esteem in which he was held by his Senate colleagues, the power he accumulated, the astonishing breadth of his career—all these factors defy facile attempts to brush Stennis aside as a fringe figure of the Deep South. The persistence of racial inequality across nearly every domain of American life is frequently seen as a troublesome problem that all people of goodwill deplore. Only rarely are these dynamics described as the countermovement victories that they are. The legacy of John C. Stennis is lasting because he embodied and represented these larger forces. He spoke to the nationwide demands of White Americans who were unready to acknowledge, much less relinquish, the full magnitude of their race-based privileges.

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