

LIVE FROM CAPITOL HILL IT'S...

PICKING COMMITTEES IN THE BLOW-DRIED AGE

by Stephen Hess

When most of us think about why a senator chooses to serve on one committee or another, a variety of motives come to mind. Perhaps the senator wants to pursue a subject that has always interested him. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Democratic senator from New York, who examined the problem of poverty as a Harvard professor, now sits on the subcommittee on Social Security and Income Maintenance Programs. Or perhaps a senator wants to be sure his state has a voice in a certain area that is vital to its economy. Thus Jesse Helms, the Republican from North Carolina, chose in 1985 to retain the chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee to better defend his state's tobacco farmers rather than become chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Other committee assignments guarantee the respect of campaign-contributing PACS.

But there is another important reason why

senators choose the committees they do: where you sit determines how often you will be photographed. Getting on the right committees is crucial to any senator who wants to get the attention of the Washington press corps—especially the television networks.

When a committee makes news, its members make news. Consider an article by Rick Atkinson and Walter Pincus that appeared on the front page of the *The Washington Post* on May 4, 1984, under the headline, "Pentagon Lists Budget Cuts":

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, [Defense Secretary Caspar] Weinberger made no effort to hide his regret at the cuts, and when Senator J. James Exon asked where further cuts could be made. . . .

But Senator Carl Levin told Weinberger, 'You come up here saying every year that if we cut one dollar. . . .'

Senator Sam Nunn, a Senate leader on defense matters, pulled him up short on that issue. . . .

Stephen Hess is a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution. This article is adapted from his book, The Ultimate Insiders: U.S. Senators in the National Media. © 1986 The Brookings Institution.

Senator John W. Warner, a former Navy secretary, questioned the cut of an attack submarine. . . .

This hearing was also covered by ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and C-SPAN.

An inspection of the worksheets kept by the Senate radio and television gallery shows that between February 1979 and June 1984 the best committee for the media hound to be on was Foreign Relations, covered by 522 network cameras. Foreign Relations has traditionally been the prime Senate incubator of presidential aspirants; since 1953, its members have included Robert A. Taft, William Knowland, Hubert Humphrey, Frank Church, Stuart Symington, Eugene McCarthy, Edmund Muskie, George McGovern, Howard Baker, John Glenn, Alan Cranston, and John F. Kennedy. Some of its power has ebbed—if only because we've kept out of a full-fledged war during the past decade—but Foreign Relations still remains the locus of congressional activity in the area that Washington journalism finds most newsworthy.

The next best place for a senator to get noticed is Judiciary (252 cameras). In recent years, Judiciary repeatedly has made news because of its jurisdiction over civil rights bills, anti-crime

legislation (including such questions as the death penalty and the insanity defense), proposed constitutional amendments (the equal rights amendment, school prayer, abortion), and immigration reform.

The fastest rising seat of influence in terms of media attention—with 156 cameras, now in third place—is the Budget Committee. Its importance has grown along with the federal deficit. I should note, too, that these figures understate its present popularity. Created in 1974, the Budget Committee was barely noticed by cameras until Ronald Reagan and David Stockman launched their budget-cutting crusade in 1981. It is followed by a perennial favorite of the press corps, the Governmental Affairs Committee (152 cameras), once known as Government Operations, which has broad authority to investigate (but not legislate) and is therefore especially involved in finding waste and malfeasance in the president's agencies. It may be a sad comment on our times that Ethics, with 82 cameras, is more than halfway down the list of 21 committees. In spite of the flurries of attention accorded such environmental stories as Three Mile Island and Love Canal, the Environment and Public Works Committee got only 60 cameras. Indian Affairs ranked dead last; not one network camera found its way into a hearing during the five and a half years surveyed.

Of course, these rankings do not reflect the ebb and flow of network attention over time. Seventy-four cameras covered Energy Committee meetings during the oil crisis in 1979, when Jimmy Carter was trying to persuade America that conservation was "the moral equivalent of war"; in subsequent years the coverage fell sharply. Similarly, more than half of the cameras that came to the Rules Committee were there in 1981, during deliberation over an issue of particular interest to the networks: whether there should be TV coverage of the Senate floor. All of the Ethics Committee's cameras focused on two cases: Senator Herman Talmadge's financial improprieties (1979) and Harrison Williams's abscam troubles (1980 and 1981).

National media potential counts heavily for some senators when they choose committee assignments. A chairman of the Environment and Public Works committee will have considerable power within the Senate but few mentions on the evening news. Take Jennings Randolph, who headed the committee (then known as Public Works) until the Republicans gained control of the Senate. Writing in these pages ("How to Make the Front Page," October 1978), Joseph Nocera

Ranking of Senate Committees by Number of Television Cameras Covering Them

<i>Committee</i>	<i>Number of Cameras</i>
<i>Foreign Relations</i>	<i>522</i>
<i>Judiciary</i>	<i>252</i>
<i>Budget</i>	<i>156</i>
<i>Governmental Affairs</i>	<i>152</i>
<i>Appropriations</i>	<i>141</i>
<i>Labor and Human Resources</i>	<i>134</i>
<i>Joint Economic</i>	<i>133</i>
<i>Armed Services</i>	<i>131</i>
<i>Energy and Natural Resources</i>	<i>120</i>
<i>Finance</i>	<i>98</i>
<i>Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>Ethics</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Commerce, Science, and Transportation</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Environment and Public Works</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Aging</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Intelligence</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Rules and Administration</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Small Business</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Veterans' Affairs</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Indian Affairs</i>	<i>0</i>

Source: Senate Radio, Television, and Press Gallery

When Senator Joe Biden was asked what he felt accounted for his newsworthiness, he replied without hesitation, "It's the committees, of course."

observed that Randolph "is a master grantsman for West Virginia, creating dams where there was only river. . . . [But] to get great press you have to create news, and that's a different matter entirely. None of this quiet, behind-the-scenes stuff that Jennings Randolph prefers." The numbers bear out Nocera's assessment. Randolph ranked eighty-second among his peers in mentions on network television news during 1973-1974. The man who succeeded him as chairman, Robert Stafford, enjoyed somewhat higher visibility, but still ranked only fifty-third in 1983.

Sitting on a committee ignored by the national press corps does not necessarily mean you won't get press coverage. The local media have reporters in Washington to make sure that actions that directly affect Main Street are covered also. And while Jennings Randolph may not have been a regular on the network news, the public works projects he brought home to West Virginia certainly got the local media attention that helped him stay in Congress for 52 years.

But senators who want to move into the national spotlight have to adjust their sights. When Bob Dole switched from Agriculture to Finance—a move that was not popular with Kansas farmers—he became more nationally newsworthy. That undoubtedly helped him in his successful bid to become majority leader and may strengthen his chances of winning the presidential nomination. When I asked Joseph Biden what he felt accounted for his newsworthiness, he replied without hesitation, "It's the committees, of course." In 1983 and 1984, Biden was a member of the three most televised committees—Foreign Relations, Judiciary (where he was the ranking Democrat), and Budget—as well as the Select Committee on Intelligence.

Other familiar faces also have chosen their committees wisely. Orrin Hatch is chairman of Labor and of the Constitution subcommittee of Judiciary and serves on Budget and the Select Committee. Howard Metzenbaum's committees are Budget, Energy, Judiciary, and Labor; and Charles Mathias is on Rules (chairman), Foreign Relations, Governmental Affairs, and Judiciary.

Conversely, less familiar faces may owe their national obscurity in part to the fact that they don't sit on the heavily televised committees. Among those who do not belong to the networks' top eight committees are David Boren, Wendell Ford, Chic Hecht, John Melcher, David Pryor, and Malcolm Wallop. Photographs of these senators are available on request from their offices.

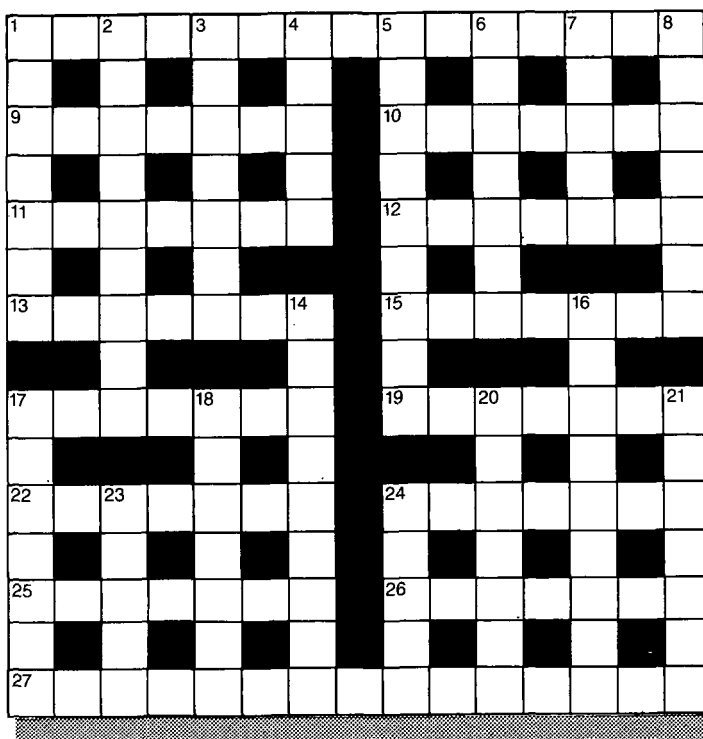
In the past, ambitious Senate investigations garnered enormous publicity. Estes Kefauver, for example, became a contender for the 1952 Democratic presidential nomination largely because of his 1951 chairmanship of a committee investigating organized crime. Kefauver's committee hearings even won an Emmy. The Army-McCarthy hearings were the riveting drama of the 1954 television season and helped cause McCarthy's censure by the Senate. Chairman John McClellan's examination of labor racketeering, with Robert F. Kennedy as chief counsel, was well covered between 1957 and 1959. Such investigations aroused anxieties during the early days of television that Senate committee rooms would become home-screen circuses. Yet after the 1950s only a few hearings garnered publicity on this scale. The most prominent exception was the Watergate hearings during the summer of 1973. Viewers in more than 47 million homes became fascinated by the personalities of the senators doing the questioning—Chairman Sam Ervin, the country philosopher from Harvard Law whose eyebrows danced while he grilled the witnesses; Howard Baker, forever asking "what the president knew and when did he know it," who suddenly pulled ahead of Edward Kennedy in a Harris poll trial heat for president; Daniel Inouye, who, during one witness's testimony, made the mistake of muttering into an open mike, "What a liar"; and Joseph Montoya, whose questions, Art Buchwald observed, provided an opportunity for viewers to run to the bathroom.

Media opportunities like those provided by Watergate are rare, however. TV stardom for a senator these days means a few seconds on the network news—but that may be enough to affect a senator's choice of committee assignments. ■

POLITICAL PUZZLE

by John Barclay

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word.



ACROSS

1. Roughly cancel a dice turn for major mishap. (7, 8)
9. Say again "Roman road consumed." (7)
10. Directs attention to repaired D.A.R. vest. (7)
11. Airplane keepers enthusiastically sang "Rah!" (7)
12. Country road ran irregularly. (7)
13. Felons confused, more hurt, about pellet. (7)
15. Planted area sketch around Queen. (7)
17. Placed glob on a sausage. (7)
19. Fashion stripe around love for quick answer. (7)
22. Mediterranean-type has pins, will travel. (7)
24. Supplied mysteriously a red, etc. (7)
25. Part of car text misread. (7)
26. Twists ropes around 51 backing wing part. (7)
27. Constructed Irene's death mill from 1 Across. (5, 4, 6)

DOWN

1. Negative alternative therein. (7)
2. Only Herb turns around following carbon catastrophe. (9)
3. Come out and mix mean tea. (7)
4. Movie dances? (5)
5. Establish company around current letter. (9)
6. Unfriendly alien in vineyard plot. Why not? (7)
7. Railroad carries eggs up? Just the opposite by mistake. (5)
8. Man of will who loses head still keeps property. (7)
14. Sight pate mix on Roman menu. (9)
16. Rail at USA irately in Southern Hemisphere. (9)
17. Difficult BA's test is a dog! (7)
18. Face shimmering sea mirage. (7)
20. Organized rounds for unusual Los Angeles sport. (7)
21. Stayed around confused Red nude. (7)
23. Later upset at ref. (5)
24. Cassette without group class. (5)

Answers to last month's puzzle:

G	R	A	M	R	H	D	M	A	N	C	U	T	S	
A	N	A	N	O	O	S	A							
M	I	N	E	L	L	I	H	I	M	S	E	L	F	
E	A	A	F	I	I	D	E							
B	A	M	B	I	N	O	C	O	N	F	E	R		
A	S	K	A	E	O									
L	O	W	G	E	R	M	A	N	E	R	R	O	R	
L	A													
S	O	R	T	S	R	E	P	O	S	S	E	S	S	
R	T	E	H	A										
S	T	A	M	E	N	S	I	N	F	I	D	E	L	
E	N	R	P	L	F	E	V							
R	E	T	I	N	U	E	L	O	R	E	L	E	I	
I	E	E	L	I	O	H	N							
F	E	D	E	R	A	L	S	P	E	N	D	I	N	G