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In The Nation

A Happening in the Senate

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, April 22 — The backbone of Mike Mansfield, the gentle Senate Democratic leader, is showing its basic iron in the weird struggle that has developed around the campaign financing plan of Russell Long, the deputy leader.

As a result, Mansfield may be facing a leadership challenge from the bumptious Long. He may incur the acute displeasure of the White House. And he may see the Senate plunged into a filibuster. But the ordinarily taciturn Mansfield pointed out to his colleagues this week that "there comes a time in the life of the leader when he has to produce or get out."

Here is the situation:

Last year, Long succeeded in having a rider attached to a tax bill, providing that taxpayers could choose to contribute a dollar of their income tax to a fund from which the major expenses of Presidential candidates would be paid.

When the Johnson Administration's bill to restore the seven per cent investment tax credit for business arrived in the Senate this year, Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee submitted a rider to repeal the Long campaign financing plan. Gore contended the plan would provide a relatively unguarded political slush fund, cripple minor party candidacies, and get in the way of a larger and more comprehensive election reform.

On to House

Long fought back; the White House sided with him; but the Gore rider was passed last week, 48 to 42. Only acceptance of the rider by the House of Representatives was needed to kill the campaign financing plan.

Outraged at the threat to his child, Long refused to give up and—as chairman of the Finance Committee—encouraged the addition of numerous extraneous riders to the basic tax bill in the hope that in a Senate-House conference, all riders, including Gore's, would be eliminated.

This week, Long resubmitted his financing plan in new form, taking particular care to make it easier for third parties to receive campaign money. On a day when five Gore supporters were absent, the Senate approved the new plan, 46 to 42—but only as an amendment to another amendment that was still pending, and not as part of the basic bill. Long argues, however, that this record vote puts the Senate in the position of having expressed approval of his revised plan.

Mansfield, by this time, had seen the Senate tied up for two weeks, during which the important investment tax credit has been kept from passage. He supported Long's general idea for campaign financing, but he agreed with Gore that it needed improvement and expansion.

Long Erupts

With what he thought was the agreement of both men, he moved to send the tax bill back to the Finance Committee, with ironclad instructions that it, (a) report back only the investment credit and the Gore rider, killing the Long plan, and, (b) write a comprehensive campaign finance and election reform bill within six weeks. If the latter bill was not passed by the Senate, the Long campaign financing plan would die on July 31.

Long erupted on the Senate floor. He claimed to have agreed to no such motion, threatened to filibuster against it, and said he had understood that Mansfield would move to have all riders, including Gore's, stripped from the bill, thus saving the campaign finance plan. Mansfield concedes that there has been an "honest misunderstanding" but has refused to alter his motion.

For Long, the proud father, and for President Johnson, the eager seeker of Federal funds for next year's campaign, the dilemma is that they now have a campaign financing scheme on the lawbooks, they do not wish to relinquish it in return for the mere possibility that the Senate may pass a more comprehensive version. On the other hand, the White House professes to be even more eager to pass the stalled investment tax credit.

Mansfield also wants the tax credit to move; but with Gore and a growing number of other Senators, he believes the time is ripe for broad-gauged election reform based on the principle of Federal financing of major campaign costs. Long's initiative of last year, the Dodd and Powell ethics cases — these already have brought from Senator Thruston Morton of Kentucky a call for Senators to disclose their personal finances, and even such a stalwart conservative as John Stennis of Mississippi is said now to favor an election reform bill.

Unanswered Questions

There are some strange elements in the situation. Why, for instance, has President Johnson not sent to Congress, as he promised to do last fall when he signed the bill containing the Long plan, the same election reform proposals he submitted to the 89th Congress? Why has the White House not yet released the report of a group headed by Richard Neustadt of Harvard on the subject of campaign financing and how the Long plan should be administered and improved? Why has Long carried his fight to such lengths?

The best answer seems to be that President Johnson is desperately anxious to keep the basic Long plan on the books to pay for next year's campaign—even though in its revised version it probably would pay for George Wallace's campaign too.

This hardly squares with the President's repeated calls for comprehensive election reform. If Long does lead a filibuster against the Mansfield motion, moreover, it can be construed as nothing less than a challenge by the deputy against the Democratic leader, whatever they may choose to call it. And such a challenge would have the one sure effect of further delaying the high-priority investment credit bill.

Thus, if the White House supports Russell Long in such a course as that, it can only be at the expense of the President's pledges, his tax bill —and Mike Mansfield.