John Stennis: The Rock of the Senate Comes Back

by Lloyd Shearer

Sen. John Stennis with wife, the former Coy Hines of New Albany, Miss. One in a family of 13 children, "Miss Coy" was a home demonstration agent in De Kalb, the Senator's home town, when they met. They were married in Depression days, Dec. 24, 1929, and have two children, John Hampton Stennis, a lawyer in Jackson, and Mrs. Samuel Syme, wife of a history professor at Wake Forest in Winston-Salem, N.C.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

When a man comes face-to-face with death and beats it, he frequently returns to life with a new philosophy, a new sense of values.

On Jan. 30, 1973, Sen. John Stennis, then 71, the all-powerful chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, was gunned down twice by a trio of youths as he emerged from his car in front of his Washington home.

Rushed to Walter Reed Army Hospital, he hemorrhaged badly, lost consciousness. "It looked very much," says "Miss Coy," his wife of nearly 45 years, "that he would not make it."

But with remarkable tenaciousness and endurance, "Honest John" Stennis held on—half in a coma, half out—three times in surgery, intravenous feeding... "They gave me a soft-boiled egg after 30 days, first solid food I ate... I had fleeting minutes of consciousness. I couldn't tell if I was dreaming or not. Everything was sort of woven together.

"I remember one night I was sure I was going to die. When you've been shot in the stomach, on the left side just below the belt-line, and they've cut you up and sewn you back together again, and you've been shot in the leg and wonder if you'll ever walk again, and you're in that twilight zone between life and death and you're suffering—you don't have as much motive to live as you would ordinarily. And that's the way it affected me at first.

Makes a decision

"I remember one particular night in the middle of all this I dreamed I saw a headline on a newspaper and it said, 'Stennis Dies in his Sleep.' It felt so real. I remember saying to myself, 'So that's the way it went?... That's what happened to him, died in his sleep, eh?'... it all felt so real. And then I woke up, and there I was still in bed—alive!

"And it seemed to me then that I had to make a special effort if I was going to survive. I deliberately considered the matter of living or dying, and I made up my mind that if I could be useful, I wanted to make the fight to survive, to overcome this thing.

"I pictured the possibility of my not being able to function either physically or mentally or both, and I reckon I spoke about it, because the doctor carefully examined all my lower extremities, muscles and everything. I knew what the doctors were looking for—possible paralysis. So I asked them if I would be able to walk again. I wanted to get that straight to begin with. They told me there would be no paralysis, at least if I pulled through. Might not pull through—the gunshot wound in the stomach was awful bad, right through the pancreas and the portal vein—but I built my optimism on the lack of paralysis.

"And I built on prayer, too. I had long prayers. I'm not big on prayers, but I just prayed that I could be useful again. That's what kept coming back to my mind. That's what the consuming thought was, the consuming question, could I survive and be useful? I decided that I could.

Learned a lesson

"Now that I've recovered—I'm back to 170 pounds—and working just as hard as ever, life means more to me than it ever did. I am determined to use what time is left to me more usefully than before. That's what I've learned from my little rendezvous with death, as you put it—to be just as useful as I can, to make the most of time."

John Stennis, the epitome of Southern gentility, the standard-bearer of Senatorial ethics, the so-called "Conscience of the U.S. Senate," widely respected, deeply loved, the last of his breed, has participated in political life ever since 1928 when he was graduated from the University of Virginia Law School and was elected to the Mississippi State House of Representatives from Kemper County.

He plans to run for reelection in 1976 at age 75 for a sixth term in the Senate, and he will probably run unopposed. He is virtually unbeatable in Mississippi where he is regarded as a living tradition and a gentleman of the old school who has long specialized in catching flies with honey.

"I believe," Stennis says, "that it's a good idea to permit a man to pop off, to give him his say. I'm not interested in his first impression but rather his second, seasoned judgment. Tolerance

and patience are two virtues which help a man get along in life. Courtesy never hurt anyone."

Stennis is so courteous and courtly that his friendly yet dignified behavior pattern has become a matter of recognition over the years in both houses.

Some time ago, Rep. Edward Hébert (D., La.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said of his Senatorial counterpart: "Now John's a gentleman. I've told John many times, 'Now, John, I wish you weren't such a gentleman. I'd rather you were a no-good sonofabitch. Then I could do business with you much better.' But you know how courtly and nice he is."

Beat back opponents

The Senator, however, is plenty tough, resilient and stubborn, and few men can shepherd a bill through the U.S. Senate with more energy, drive and persistence than he. He recently floor-managed the $21.9 billion military procurement bill through the Senate despite a tiring, hard-fought week of knowledgeable opposition.

For some years now, Stennis has suffered the unfair reputation of being a "patsy" for the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency and the forces of conservatism. He was regarded as a Vietnam "war-hawk," and a defender of Nixon, and it was said of him that each year the Pentagon would submit "a watered" military procurement bill from which the Senator would then proceed to squeeze out a few billion, leaving both sides relatively happy, a technique he no longer abides, if he ever did.

It is interesting to note the changes which have taken place in the pre- and post-accident Stennis.

For example, I interviewed Stennis five weeks before he became a victim of the senseless armed robbery from which it took him 17 long months to recover. At that time in December, 1972, he said of the CIA, "one has to take those fellows on faith. I think they're doing a good job."

Asked him again

Last month I again asked him, since he is head of the Senate's Subcommittee on Central Intelligence, what he thought of the CIA and its activities.

"I am giving the CIA more supervision than I did," he readily confessed. "The thing about the agency which disturbed me greatly was its activities at home, getting into domestic matters. I was disturbed that they actually took part to a degree in providing that fellow (Howard Hunt) with false faces and paraphernalia used in the Dr. Fielding burglary. That concerned me greatly.

"Let me say, too," he later added in a phone interview, "that I do not approve of such missions as 'destabilizing' the Allende Government in Chile. That is not the primary mission of the CIA as I see it. And I am sure that Bill Colby does not favor such missions either. And I tell you this. I am in favor of stopping all of them in the future. And I think he is, too. One thing is to get information which I regard as the primary function of the agency. Another thing is to go messin' about into the internal affairs of other nations in which you have no business.

"I must tell you that I got into this CIA subcommittee, of which I'm now chairman, gradually. But I am now showing it more vigilance than ever before. I am making some rather rugged inquiries into all of its activities everywhere.

"You must understand, of course, that the CIA has done some outstanding work like with the U-2 overflights and their role in the SALT talks. They have provided us with a lot of good information, saved us lots of money on unnecessary weapons systems.

"I have a lot of confidence in Bill Colby. I think he's realizing what he's up against these days. He's a professional, you know, came up through the ranks. I think he's doing the best he can. He takes orders, you know. He doesn't initiate these missions. He provides us with information. But others decide."

Indian Ocean base

In line with this last statement, it's interesting to note that Stennis recently made an impassioned plea for $18.1 million for the expansion of a controversial U.S. naval base on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia even though CIA Director Colby testified that he foresaw only a limited increase in Soviet naval activity in the immediate future even after the Suez Canal was opened.

Boomed Stennis in that deep, stentorian, attention-getting voice of his: "I am vitally concerned that we have the facilities there to help the Navy which might need to protect the oil route lanes."

Although Stennis is by nature a cautious, conservative man, the archetypal Southern Senator who dislikes rocking the boat, and on occasion a master obfuscator and wheel-spinner, he enjoys a long-standing reputation in the Senate for fairness and restraint. He now appears, however, less cautious, less restrained, and more willing to speak his mind than he did before his accident.

On Vietnam, for example, he says: "I was opposed to going into the war in the beginning, but once our flag was committed and our boys were sent, I thought it was my position to back them up. Now, if the South Vietnamese were to lose Saigon, I would not be in favor of having American troops reenter that fight. I just would not be."

On Rockefeller: "He's a good man and I'm sure he'll make a fine Vice President, but my personal choice for the position would have been Mel Laird. Right smart, Mel Laird. I have a lot of confidence in him. Even called Ford before he was sworn in as President and told him Laird would make him a good V.P."

On President Ford's pardoning of ex-President Nixon: "I'm in favor of it. Maybe the timing was premature, but as I see it, from where I sit I think Nixon has had punishment far exceeding anything that anyone in office has ever had. His punishment will be lifelong. To me a forced resignation from the highest office in the land, that is the greatest punishment. At least it is to me. I expect that solitude, his solitude, is worse than death. It would be easier to die in a way. The problem is to live, live.

"As a former circuit court judge in Mississippi I can tell you that the acceptance of a pardon is tantamount to an admission of guilt. In effect, Mr. Nixon already pled guilty when he resigned. As to why the others involved in Watergate have not been pardoned, well, I still believe in the principle of equal justice under law, but I tell you it just can't be done. The application of it to every individual case, complete equality—it's just impossible. But I agree with President Ford's action. He had to stop the bleeding some time. And he chose to stop it early in his Administration when he had his most popular public support."

On U.S. troop commitment in Europe: "We certainly do not need 300,000 troops in Europe, not after all these years. I think we can get along on considerably less, but I think first we have to bring about certain conditions with our allies there before we begin reducing our troops.

On his "tough-it-out" advice to Richard Nixon: "I told President Nixon to tough-it-out, but not in connection with Watergate. That was in connection with the war in Vietnam. Now the press interpreted that statement as relating to Watergate, but what I really said was this: 'He knows what it is to tough-it-out, he can do it.' I was talking about the war then, although when it came up I never did explain it fully."

On the Nixon transcripts: "I was wanting to do it, to play some role in the matter. After months in the hospital I was feeling pretty good and this was a chance for me to start making a contribution, to exercise that usefulness I was talking about. So I agreed to the undertaking, but only, I said, after I had checked it with Senators Ervin and Baker.

"The way it went, I was to dictate the transcript on anything that was close or controversial. I would have had full control. Anything that I didn't agree on, I just wouldn't sign or okay it. Of course, I'm very glad that I didn't get any further into it than I did!"

On President Ford and Presidents in general: "The most important decision a new President has to make concerns his advisers, the men who are going to be closest to him. He's got to be mighty careful about the men he chooses. Because a President is so dependent on them, that's why.

"I remember the late President Kennedy saying in my presence that to him the most frightening things about the Presidency was the small percentage of items that he himself had to make an exclusive judgment on. The very small number of decisions that he could say he had made all by himself. He had to take the word, 90 or 95 percent of the time, of others. So that would be my first advice to a new President: Be careful of the men you surround yourself with. They will make you look very good or very bad or very in between."

Stennis is chairman of the Senate's oversight subcommittee on the CIA. Bill Colby, the current CIA director, visited Stennis at Walter Reed Hospital during Stennis' recovery. Here, they meet in Stennis' office; it was once the office of Stennis' Senatorial hero, the late Senator from Georgia Richard Russell.