

Potomac profile

# 'Senator' Pepper, at 70, has outlasted his hatchetmen

By Larry Mahoney

Washingtonians, weary of District-baiting demagoguery by committee chairmen from the South, may have undergone some sense of "here we go again" when, in 1969, the House of Representatives created a Select Committee on Crime and appointed as its chairman a 69-year-old Florida congressman who had been born and raised in rural Alabama.

But the Crime Committee was getting no Claghorn for its chief. Instead, it got Claude Pepper, whose 40-year political career presents a heartening exception to the warning that Edgar Lee

Masters sounded in *Spoon River Anthology*: "Beware of the man who rises to power from one suspender."

Congressman Claude Pepper has served in both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Pepper was first a senator and then a congressman.

Claude Pepper was an untypical Southern senator and national leader, perhaps the most important senator Florida ever sent to Washington; an early and primary victim of the "soft-on-communism" campaign techniques of the McCarthy era, a good example of American political pragmatism; a master politician of the Florida that V.O. Key, in his classic *Southern Politics*, called a state "unled and unbossed, where it is every man for himself;" a leg-

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The House Select Committee on Crime is headed by Claude Pepper, whose 40-year political career presents a heartening exception to the warning that Edgar Lee Masters sounded: "Beware the man who rises to power from one suspender."

islator operating ahead of his time.

Instead of one senator among 100 (or 96 as it was in his day), Pepper, since 1962, has been one congressman among some 435. The prestige and the power are not the same, but he seems to thrive in the lower house, where he is a respected and important leader, if not of the first rank as he was in the Senate. Others, including John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay and Thomas Hart Benton, preceded him as ex-senators in the House. Staff and friends still acknowledge Pepper as the Senator 21 years after he ceased to be that.

Pepper sits in his office, in Room 432 of the Cannon Building at desk No. 48595, the massive brown teak of the House. The high walls of the office are plastered with photographs and plaques of 40 years in politics. He is flanked by a potted palm, the flags of Florida and the U.S., a bust of himself as senator. The photographs range from his parents' graves to the surrender on the battleship *Missouri*, from Pepper the boy orator in the He-flin Debating Society, to Pepper the confidant of FDR, and beyond.

Claude Pepper, unlike a lot of silvertongued politicians, never really had the good looks to complement what was coming out of his mouth. He would be a media disaster in these days of the all-mighty statewide television; no LeRoy Collins, he. When Pepper did his campaigning, though, being a golden boy probably didn't matter all that much. More decisive talents were his. He was master of the cypress stump, of hushpuppy oratory at the fish fry, of the sound truck and the motorcade, of the Pentacostal preacherman variety of joke, the reference to Job and jobs, Ruth and roads and Roosevelt, his hero. A gifted Populist orator; a preliminary mouth of the people.

Pepper the senator was adept with the federal pork barrel, too, and the establishment of airfields and forts in Florida during the early days of the Second World War was not entirely attributable to sunshine and vacant palmetto scrublands; FDR remembered his New Deal and lendlease ally.

Today, Claude Pepper retains a good measure of that flair and style from an urban, largely northern-born and heavily Jewish and Negro congressional district at the tip of Florida, a consti-

tuency that bears hardly any semblance at all to the underpopulated state that counted Claude as its man in Washington in the 1930s and '40s. It is a style of great personal courtesy, of occasional oratory, of keeping the memory of FDR kindled among Izzy and Bella, the retired Lower Eastsiders on South Beach, who vote always; of personally plowing the grassroots. The 11th Congressional District of Dade County has a veteran representative who keeps on his toes, partially because, as an aide said, "He works hard because he lost once."

**C**laude Denson Pepper was born to an Alabama farm family

on Sept. 8, 1900. (His mother once said that he started talking when he was nine months old and he's been talking since.) When the boy was 10, the family moved 10 miles down the road to Camp Hill, in the heart of Black Belt cotton country. "I walked the family milk cow down the path to our new home," he remembers. "My father became a merchant, and later the chief of police in Camp Hill." Pepper worked from early on because the family was poor. As a teen-ager, he was a wandering blocker of hats. After a customer threatened to whip his hide for ruining a Sunday-go-to-meeting hat, he took a test and became a school teacher in the peanut town of Dothan, then worked as a steel hand in the belching furnaces of Birmingham before

entering the University of Alabama.

Working his way through college, Pepper avoided the First World War's conscription by joining the UA Army Training Corps. He finished Phi Beta Kappa at Tuscaloosa and went North to the Harvard Law School, where, after three more years of double-timing it as waiter-student, he got his law degree and was ranked in the top six students of his class.

It was 1924 and, as a son of the South with political ambition, Pepper went down to teach law at the state university of Arkansas, where he turned down a high-paying job with a utility company (that being not good work for a Populist). One of Professor Pepper's students was a smart boy

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In former campaign days, Claude Pepper was a master of the cypress stump, of hushpuppy oratory at the fish fry, of the sound truck and the motorcade, of the Pentacostal preacherman variety of joke, the reference to Job and jobs, Ruth and roads.

**Pepper, from page 9**  
from a prominent family: J. William Fulbright.

Boomtime Florida beckoned, and Arkansas didn't appear to be so much a land of opportunity as its auto tag motto proclaimed. Fatefully for him, Claude Pepper took a job in the law offices of Judge W. H. Davis at Perry, a scraggly little pine-tree town at the peninsula's Big Bend on the Gulf. It was 1925, his starting salary was \$125 a month, and from there he went straight up.

First it was the state legislature, then a temporary setback when he failed to be re-elected there, then big game in 1932: the U.S. Senate seat of powerful Park Trammell. He lost, but narrowly, and next time came far sooner than expected. In 1936, with the death of Duncan U. Fletcher, the senior Florida senator, Pepper ran without opposition for the remainder of the term. That same year he married Irene Mildred Webster of St. Petersburg.

Claude Pepper took Capitol Hill by verbal assault. His maiden speech in the Senate was an indictment of his peers and colleagues for deserting the New Deal; in no time at all, he was the most prominent of the freshmen. His stature was soon to surpass that of most of the veterans.

By 1938, slickhaired Claude Pepper, eyes rolling heavenward, gesturing before a red Ford topped by washbasin-sized megaphones, was on *Time's* cover as "the Flor-

ida fighting cock (who will be a White House weather-vane." Pepper was a good barometer for the President and his program, a New Dealer supreme. He won and his conspicuousness mushroomed; some saw him as "the great liberal" and others considered him "the most dangerous man in the Senate since Huey P. Long." He became an influential member of the Foreign Relations Com-

*The Washington Post/Potomac/June 27, 1971*

mittee (now headed by his old student), Labor and Public Welfare committees at a time when the United States, working its way out of an economic depression, was nosing into what would become the century's great war.

At the Nuremberg Congress of the Nazis, Pepper watched another master orator from afar and returned to Washington convinced that Adolph Hitler was out to conquer the world. Working with FDR, the Floridian pioneered lendlease legislation and pushed for a destroyers-for-bases agreement with Great Britain; he also promoted compulsory military service. The hawk from Florida was hanged in effigy on the Capitol lawn by "The Mothers of the United States of America."

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Domestically, the senator stayed close to FDR. The hostile *New York Herald Tribune* chided him: "When the White House has an important balloon to send up, it invites Senator Pepper to supply the necessary oratorical helium." He aggravated a lot of people in Florida by breaking with the Southern bloc and co-sponsoring legislation to repeal the poll tax; he even lived dangerously, politically, by appearing on speakers' platforms with blacks.

Pepper was safely in the Senate for another five years when the war ended. He began to operate on an internationalist stage, particularly in relation to the Soviet Union, America's major wartime ally. Considered a warmonger in 1940, Pep-

per had become by the second half of the decade a peacemonger in the eyes of many.

"I believed that the seeds of a third world war were present at the end of the second," he told this reporter recently, "and the advent of nuclear weaponry made that possibility all the more horrible. I wanted to do everything in my power to keep

the two giants, us and the Soviets, from becoming enemies. If I had had more support, if I had been more effective, the world would have been spared all of this Cold War, all of the troubles of the past 25 years."

Claude Pepper met with Josef Stalin in 1945. In the ruins of Berlin, the senator hopped aboard a Russian military transport and flew to Moscow, fearful all the way because the young Soviet soldiers were smoking American cigarettes while lounging on barrels of fuel. Safely in the Soviet capital, Pepper went (with George Kennan as his translator) into the bowels of the Kremlin, talked for nearly an hour with Stalin.

Pepper came away convinced that the Soviets were war weary, that the United States had treated them badly by plainly ignoring a request for a \$6 billion recovery loan, that the Red Army was demobilizing and that Stalin wished to work for peace and amity with the U.S. Pepper wrote about it in a Page One piece supplied to *The New York Times* by the North American Newspaper Alliance, which financed his trip. Allying himself with Henry Wallace and the Progressives, he split with Harry S. Truman over the military phases of the Marshall Plan, in particular the arms shipments to Greece and Turkey, where communist revolts were being smashed. In 1948, he urged Dwight Eisenhower, then president of Columbia University, to

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**Pepper**, from page 21

oppose Truman for the Democratic nomination; briefly, he put his own name before the convention.

At Pepper's homebase, unfriendly eyes were watching and plans were being hatched. That meeting in Moscow, that article in *The Times* and Pepper's entire record and attitude toward the Soviet Union would be used cynically and fervently — and deadly effectively — against the senior Florida senator. In 1950, Claude Pepper became the first and most prominent political victim of the Cold War in the United States.

In that Florida election year, Claude Pepper would become *Red Pepper*, apologist for Joe Stalin, "a pervert by assonance," an associate of an uppity 'Nigger' named Paul Robeson, a proponent of socialized medicine, the very symbol of all that was far leftfield in the New Deal, an anti-business colleague of union gangsters and racketeers.

In short, Claude Pepper was a target. Both he and his opponent, George Armistead Smathers of Miami, today an ex-senator, still bear scars of '50, though Pepper, who lost, carries the most. That year was a pivotal point in the politics of Florida, the South and the nation. It was a march right, the spawning moment of McCarthyism, the rise on the national scene of Richard Milhous Nixon. The purge of Pepper began it all.

Wavyhaired young Congressman Smathers, nicknamed "Smooch" at the University of Florida and back from the war in the Pacific, had been an ardent supporter of Pepper in previous years, and the senator had helped the young lawyer get his shingle up. Smathers himself was not so important; his backers were. Especially Edward Ball.

Pepper felt that the people who had the big money should be made to pay for raising up the blacks and the poor whites. This

idea grossly offended Ball, baron of the billion-dollar Florida duPont interests, which, besides owning at that time 500,000 acres of timberland, entire counties, paper mills and a railroad and the largest chain of banks in the South, was also considered the proprietor of a good many members of the Florida Legislature. To Ed Ball, Claude Pepper was "that Buzzard." The animosity was mutual; Pepper thought of

Ball as a ruthless economic tyrant.

So by 1950, Ball and his empire, along with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Medical Association and the National Association of Manufacturers, had fueled, primed and raring to go the most elaborate crusade of political annihilation ever seen in the South.

Smathers attacked and, in retrospect, the stinging words seem unreal: "The leader of the radicals and the extremists is now on trial in Florida. Arrayed against him will be loyal Americans . . . Standing against us will be certain Northern labor bosses, all the socialists, all the radicals and all the fellow travelers . . . Florida will not allow herself to become entangled in the spiraling spider web of the Red network. The people of our state will no longer tolerate advocates of treason. The outcome can truly determine whether our homes will be destroyed, whether our children will be torn from their mothers, trained as conspirators and turned against their parents, their home and their church. I stand for election on the principle of the free state against the jail state."

A scenario of the spring of '50: Gunslinger George Smathers, eyes glinting, like Clint Eastwood in an Italian-made Western, entertains—and probably confuses

—a gathering of North Floridians: "Are you aware that Claude Pepper is known all over Washington as a shameless extrovert? Not only that, but this man is reliably reported to practice nepotism with his sister-in-law, and he has a sister who was once a thespian in wicked New YORK. Worst of all, it is an established fact that Mr. Pepper, before his marriage, practiced celibacy."

William Buckley was to call this "making Claude Pepper a pervert by assonance." Some of the less funny things that Pepper was called in 1950 include "spell-binding pinko," "Nigger-lover," "wiley, oil-tongued apologist for 'Red' Quill of the CIO Transport Workers," "graduate of Felix Frankfurter's Harvard Law School and classmate of Alger Hiss."

Photographs of Pepper and Paul Robeson at Madison Square Garden rained down on the state like the tiny toads that sometimes fall from the thunderheads of a Florida summer afternoon.

Three weeks before election

*The Washington Post/Potomac/June 27, 1971*

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**The smear  
put  
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by  
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votes.**

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day, *The Saturday Evening Post*, in an article under the byline of Ralph McGill, early oracle of Deep South liberalism, carried a nasty attack on Pepper, calling him a spellbinding pinko sup-

ported by ultra-leftwing friends. It was one of the hardest blows of the campaign, pushing even liberals and moderates, rare critters that they were, over to Smathers. (McGill later expressed shame and sorrow over the article, saying that Smathers' father had tricked him into writing it.) A little book, *The Red Record of Senator Claude Pepper*, came out during the campaign's last week. Miami, a Pepper stronghold, got nine tons of the hatchet-job alone.

At the ballot box, Populist Panhandle folk and Tampa-Miami moderates deserted Pepper in droves. The smear put Smathers in office by 67,000 votes. From Manhattan, Henry Luce's magazine empire trumpeted: "Republicans joyfully saw the result as a harbinger of a national conservative trend . . . a blow to the Fair Deal nationally and a warning of the communist issue which Republicans are sure to raise this fall."

The primary of 1950 was a crushing blow to Claude Pepper, not only politically but personally. "I sometimes wonder how he survived the first years after he left the Senate," a Washington friend said. "He had campaign debts to pay off and, unlike a lot of senators, he had not been too busy looking after his own financial interests

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**Pepper, from page 25** while in office." The ex-senator and his wife, Mildred (they had no children), returned to Florida to pick up the pieces.

Pepper expanded his Tallahassee law firm, and opened an office in Miami Beach. His old talent for the law proved enduring and he kept his interest in politics and public issues alive, appearing on platforms with Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and 1956. But he desperately missed the United States Senate. In 1958, he tried to return by unseating Spessard Holland. Pepper got 321,000 votes, but it wasn't enough.

The swelling population of South Florida presented another

kind of route back to Capitol Hill. In 1962 a new congressional district was carved out of Dade County (Miami), perhaps the South's, and even one of the nation's, most liberal areas. Pepper easily won the election. At the age of 62, Claude D. Pepper became a freshman congressman. The return to Washington, associates say, seemed to rejuvenate him.

George A. Smathers left the Senate in 1969, his health bad, his reputation largely that of a senator who looked after his friends and cultivated the special interests, a man of considerable influence with John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson but also linked

to Rafael Trujillo and Bobby Baker.

So it is that at 70, and 40 of those years in public office, Claude Pepper has politically outlived the hatchetman who took his Senate seat in 1950. From his seat in the House of Representatives, Pepper endures. He is still liberal, and the times, well, they haven't entirely caught up with him yet.

The Americans for Constitutional Action, the rightist equivalent of the liberal and better known Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), consider Claude Pepper the most liberal Southern member of either house of Congress. Ratings after the 91st Congress last year, cumulative to 1957, gave Pepper a near negligible score of 3 per cent. The average for Florida's 14-man delegation was 63 per cent, which might mean, in the eyes of the ACA, that Pepper was 20 times as liberal as the average Florida congressman. (Senator Fulbright, Pepper's former pupil, got a 24 per cent.)

Such an early and continuing record of liberalism might seem to make Claude Pepper something of a hero to the young men and women of the New Left. But, of course, it is not like that. His last opponent was a Miami youth, a sort of "Wild in the Streets" candidate who accused Pepper of all varieties of selling out. And to Robert Kunst, a 29-year-old Miamian, chairman of Florida's New Party and ranked up there with Dr. Spock and Gore Vidal in the national apparatus, Pepper is "a has-been liberal, sort of wishy-washy, who just won't give us any kind of a hand."

Yet Claude Pepper seems even more youth conscious than the average congressman, even considering the advent of the teenybopper voter. This may be largely because of his work on the Crime Committee, delving into the drug issue and also concerned with the often abusive treatment of juvenile offenders by the courts and the jails. The 70-year-old frequently comes to moments like this in his conversations and public utterances:

"Yes, I am reading up on marijuana and all of that... we've listened to Art Linkletter, whose daughter died of LSD, or was it speed? Somehow or another, we need the best educational brains in the country to educate the people, especially the young, on these drugs... If you didn't put it to 'em

by preaching... We need a rock 'n' roll star to popularize a song for the wholesomely exhilarated...

Here he raps his fingers on the desk in faltering effort to capture a beat... "Um, ah, I don't even have to take marijuana to feel good. Been on a trip, as it was." At three-score and ten, Claude Pepper is still operating on the current edge of what is happening, if a bit clumsily at times.

Besides his chairmanship of the Crime Committee, a plum he got because his fellow congressmen hold him in high regard, Pepper sits on the House Committee on Rules, a sort of Dardanelles through which legislation must sail or sink. Lyndon Johnson helped his old New Deal mentor get that seat. Pepper, a master parliamentarian, is considered one of Rules' most able members.

Pepper's third committee assignment is one of great irony. When, in 1969, Speaker of the House John McCormack and powerbroker Wilbur Mills asked him to become a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Pepper's first reflex was to say that he wanted nothing to do with the HUAC of the witchhunting, blacklisting Fifties and early Sixties. "In 1950, a lot of Smathers' material was leaked from the HUAC staff," a legislative aide said.

But McCormack and Mills persisted, telling Pepper they wanted him on HUAC because they did not want a witchhunting committee. Pepper took the seat and today he is the ranking Democrat on the committee, since renamed Internal Security and very much not a trampler of individuals on the altar of security. It is possible that he might someday be its chairman.

It is a good story of American political pragmatism. A time and a season for all things and all positions. Claude Pepper, short on ideology but firmly in the camp of the liberals, in 40 years of public office has been hanged in effigy as a warmonger, damned as a peacemonger, a man burned by the Red-batters and Super-Americans, who sits on the House's onetime commie-hunting apparatus to keep it from going berserk again, an early liberal whose record does not mean so much to the Left of this decade.

With it all, Claude Pepper of Miami, Fla., and Washington, D.C., has not heard his last hurrah. ■



A youth-conscious Rep. Pepper takes time out from his work for a massage in the basement of the Cannon House Office Building.