

Managing Congressional Papers: A View of the Senate

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"THE UNITED STATES SENATE of today is undeniably over-pressured, overworked and undermanaged."¹ That statement prefaced a recently completed year-long study of the Senate's administrative structure. It suggests considerable problems for tomorrow's archivists and researchers as they search for understanding of the Senate's role through today's documentary source materials. The Senate is, by constitutional design and historical evolution, an administratively fragmented institution.

Unlike the Executive Branch of the federal government or private corporations, or even the House of Representatives, the Senate lacks the hierarchical organization necessary to implement and maintain effective records management and archival programs.

The Senate Historical Office was established in 1975, in part to assist creators and users of Senate records. We are interested in official committee records as well as office files of individual senators. Our major role is advisory. We do not recommend or create filing systems. We do not pack boxes. We do not intend to build our own archives. We are solely interested in facilitating the flow of archival materials to repositories where they will receive sufficient care and exposure.²

This paper sets forth my impressions of the environment in which senators' office files and personal papers are created, organized, and disposed of. My conclusions are indeed subjective, but they are based on a decade of observation and numerous interviews with senators, their staffs, archivists, and users.

To understand the scope and problems of senatorial collections, it is necessary to consider the climate in which they are created. Before 1947, personal staffs of senators were limited to a handful of stenographers and clerks. Sensitive to public criticism and fearing a display of personal incapacity, the Senate had been traditionally reluctant to provide itself adequate staff resources. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 marked the beginning of congressional efforts to build staff of a quality at least equal to that available to the Executive Branch.

The author is Historian of the Senate. He presented this paper on October 6, 1977, in Salt Lake City, Utah, at the forty-first annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists.

¹ Albert J. Abrams, "Strategies for Management Improvements in the U.S. Senate," in U.S. Congress, Senate, Commission on the Operation of the Senate, *Senate Administration*, Committee Print (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), p. 3.

² For a discussion of the objectives of the Senate Historical Office see "The Senate Historical Office: Why, What and For Whom?," *Congressional Record*, June 13, 1977, pp. S9516-19 (Daily Edition).

Since then, the size and quality of congressional staffs have increased dramatically. Today, senators' staffs range in size from thirteen to seventy-one.³ Their work falls into two major categories: legislative, and constituent service.

In the legislative role, each senator is expected to keep abreast of all issues affecting his state. This requires formulating an opinion and keeping track of a large portion of the 25,000 bills introduced in each two-year congressional session. In addition, senators serve on as many as a dozen committees or subcommittees and must devote considerable attention to the issues pending before these bodies.

Added to a senator's legislative role is an overwhelming volume of demands for constituent service. Senate offices currently receive from five to twelve thousand pieces of mail per week. Much of this mail and thousands of additional telephone calls seek to enlist senatorial assistance in penetrating the obscure and massive federal bureaucracy to expedite social security payments, upgrade military discharges, resolve immigration and claims cases, and deal with hundreds of other government-related difficulties. Each office assigns a large percentage of its resources to handling constituent casework. Small states generate upwards of five thousand "cases" per year. New York and California average about forty thousand. Senator Kennedy's office claims to investigate as many as seventy thousand cases each year for his Massachusetts constituents.⁴

One of the first crises that each new senator faces is how to organize and maintain an effective office filing system to cope with this flood of demands. Some offices seek assistance from records management experts at the Library of Congress or the National Archives.⁵ Others build systems reflecting their senator's personality and work habits. Still others try to ignore the problem, moving from one expedient to another, until caught in the cold realities of the next election campaign when a record of service must be located and publicized.

Most members are acutely aware of the correlation between their ability to account for constituent services rendered and their chances for reelection. One recently defeated senator traced his unscheduled retirement to a file system that failed. He was unable to respond with specific dates, names, and places to his opponent's challenges against the vigor of his stewardship.

Within the past five years, Senate offices have begun to take advantage of advances in automated information storage and retrieval technology. The Senate Watergate Committee, faced in 1973 with the need to organize and have immediate access to enormous amounts of data, developed a system using microfilm as a storage medium and the computer for text searching, indexing, and report preparation. Senator Mark Hatfield, a member of the Senate Subcommittee on Computer Services, applied the experience of the Watergate Committee to his personal office situation. The results, by all accounts, have been highly satisfactory. Senator Hatfield attributes his reelection in 1972, in part, to the resulting improvements in paperwork management. He reduced the average response time to constituent letters from thirty days to twenty-four hours. By

³ Susan Webb Hammond, "The Operation of Senators' Offices," in U.S. Congress, Senate, Commission on the Operation of the Senate, *Senators: Offices, Ethics, and Pressures*, Committee Print (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 4-6.

⁴ Janet Breslin, "Constituent Service," in *Senators: Offices, Ethics, and Pressures*, p. 21.

⁵ Both institutions have prepared manuals to assist in establishing congressional office filing systems. See U.S. National Archives and Records Service, *Files Handbook for Congressional Offices: Senate Members* (June 1972).

the end of this year many of his colleagues will have adopted automated correspondence management systems. Automation of Senate files, slow in coming, is clearly the wave of the future and it would seem to have major consequences for archival planning.⁶ There is now a reasonable basis for the belief that the recent dramatic growth in the volume of many senators' files arriving at repositories will level off and begin to decline over the next decade. Collections will tend to be better organized, more accessible and, it is hoped, more compatible with those of other congressional colleagues. Archives should be able to reduce their processing costs as material arrives in microform already indexed in a form suitable for use in the repositories' reading equipment.⁷

So much for the near and the distant future. I would like to draw your attention back to the concerns of the present, recalling situations with which many of you are already too familiar. I have mentioned the climate in which Senate records are created and organized. At this point, let us consider current attitudes among senators and their staffs regarding disposition.

In earlier years it was generally possible to find adequate office storage space for non-current as well as current files. The rapid increase in staff size, from an average of fourteen per member in 1961 to thirty-one today, the ease of photocopying, and the decrease in physical storage capacity, have led to a crisis of larger proportions than most senators, archivists, or historians realize.⁸ In the unrelenting battle for storage space between people and files, the people always win, the files always lose.

What has been happening to the older, non-current files? There are several options and none of them is terribly appealing. When records expand beyond the limited storage facilities of an individual senator's office, they are often sent to an attic storage locker, the size of a small room. In the summertime the temperature rises as high as 120 degrees. There are additional basement storerooms offering cooler, but more humid, surroundings. Some of these rooms have open condensation drainage ditches. One senator recently lost many valuable thirty-year-old records to a basement flood.

The interior of these storerooms is generally in great disarray. One archivist, working on the papers of a current senior senator, offers a vivid account of the situation from the perspective of his attic office. "The potential for paper fire is great. Stacks of boxes, some broken open with files spilling out, are mixed with containers of publications and envelopes, many of which are dumped close to air conditioning and heating equipment." From time to time the janitorial crew will be ordered to sweep up indiscriminately the collected papers, delivering them with great efficiency to the eager clutches of the waste paper contractor.

The National Archives offers an alternative. It will accept records of individual members for "courtesy storage" at its Federal Records Center in Suitland, Maryland. Half of the senators in office during 1976 stored approximately twenty thousand feet of records at this facility.⁹ When senators leave Congress,

⁶ Marilyn E. Courtot, "A Look at Senate Data Processing," *Law and Computer Technology* 9 (Third Quarter, 1976): 49-67.

⁷ The issue of compatibility was discussed in a paper by Sylvia Faibisoff (professor, Graduate School of Library Science, University of Illinois) delivered at the "Seminar on Congressional Archives," Dirksen Congressional Leadership Research Center, Pekin, Illinois, May 6, 1976. For a brief summary of the entire seminar, see *Congressional Record*, May 25, 1976, pp. S7908-11.

⁸ Hammond, "The Operation of Senator's Offices," p. 6.

⁹ "Volume of Records of Members and Former Members of the Senate Stored at the Washington National Records Center," April 6, 1976, prepared for the Senate Historical Office.

they are asked to remove all stored records. This must be done within three months of the completion of service if they wish to take advantage of free mailing privileges.

This storage option has several drawbacks from the point of view of the member's office. The Suitland facility lacks the personnel and funding to perform a records management function for members. It will return to an office not more than five boxes per request. If the office has failed to prepare box lists, this retrieval task becomes virtually impossible. The alternative is to send an available staff member or intern to Suitland to battle the high odds against finding the needed document. The final option for the storage of older records is to send them in regular increments to a home state library or archives. Only a handful of Senate offices currently do so.

So far, my remarks on disposition have focused on the day-to-day problems of storage and retrieval. A far greater and more immediate problem for the archivist is the manner in which members arrange for the final disposition of their entire collection. Consider how the eighteen senators who left Congress earlier this year handled the problem.

Eight of them decided in advance to retire, nine were retired by their constituents, and one found a better paying position as Vice President. As one might expect, the voluntary retirees gave more consideration to plans for disposing of the papers than did those who were defeated. Not one of the defeated had designated a repository prior to election day. On the day following the election, the staffs of these nine were too busy seeking future employment to care much about the files. Records were either destroyed or thrown into storage boxes and shipped to a destination about which the office staff neither knew nor cared. File integrity took a back seat to the demands of building superintendents that the offices be cleaned and vacated within seven weeks. Only then did several of the senators realize the truth of the observation that a senator always comes to Washington with a throng of admirers, but he departs very much alone.

It might be instructive to look at how the eight voluntary retirees planned for the transfer of their papers. Each member of this group designated a staff member whose principal function was to organize and dispose of the senator's papers. Some of those selected had considerable experience with congressional papers. Others learned on the job. Most of them appeared to have the confidence of their senators and access whenever decisions were necessary. Some were given as much as eighteen months to complete the job, while others had approximately six months. With the exception of one senator who relied heavily on an archivist on leave from the institution that was to receive his papers, all seemed to agree that the principal efforts to organize, inventory, and weed should be accomplished before the papers left Washington.

The Senate Historical Office maintained close ties with each of these operations. The most common complaint, aside from lack of advance planning, was the inability to wrest from senior staff aides their private "working" files. These aides, administrative and legislative assistants, often consider their files to be personal property. When they leave congressional service, many take their most important records with them, as valued assets for subsequent law practices or lobbying careers. Senators, having no way of knowing the exact scope of these satellite files, are generally reluctant to assert control. A related problem occurs in offices where the senator has served for many years and leaves office for

reasons of death, defeat, or ill health. Loyal staff members, without benefit of the senator's broader perspective, take it upon themselves to make major decisions about what to save and what to destroy. Fearing damage to a reputation established over a lifetime of service, staff aides tend to adopt the attitude: "when in doubt, throw it out."

These observations lead to my major point. It is absolutely imperative for a repository interested in acquiring a senator's records to plan ahead. In January, I met with each of the eighteen new senators to discuss, among other things, prior planning for the disposition of their office files. I urged them to make plans for disposition of their papers by the end of their second year in office. At that time their office file storage space situation will have become critical. Rather than delaying the inevitable by shipping files to the nearby federal records center, senators should, in my judgement, send them to a well-staffed and interested home state library, historical society, or other archival repository. These are some of the questions we suggest that senators put to interested institutions:

- Will you accept everything we send you?
- Are you able to respond to our requests for information from the files?
- What staff resources will you assign to the processing of the collection? Would you be willing to send an archivist to Washington at regular intervals, perhaps every two years, to oversee the organization of papers prior to their shipment?
- What types of files, publications, and memorabilia would you prefer not to receive?
- What are your recommendations regarding restriction of the collection? Can you provide protected storage for security classified and other sensitive material?
- Do you have an exhibits program? If so, what are your thoughts regarding display of portions of this collection?
- Do you have the papers of other members of Congress? Do you intend to solicit additional collections?
- Do you consider your existing storage and display facilities adequate? If not, are you planning to expand?
- What do you consider to be your greatest strength as a research institution? Do you have an acquisition program? If so, would you consider it to be specialized or broadly-based?

Those who have worked extensively in the papers of recent former senators readily agree that as much as 80 or even 90 percent of a given collection is of marginal value. My remarks are directed at capturing, intact, as much as possible of the remaining 10 to 20 percent. From our perspective, it would seem to make excellent sense to extend the transfer process over a number of years. This approach will avoid last minute destruction by overly protective spouses or staffs. It offers the advantage of quick retrieval by the senator's staff, both in Washington and in the various state offices. Finally, it reduces the delay in opening a collection to research. Senator Richard Russell kept his records in Washington during his thirty-eight years of service. Upon his death in 1971, three tractor-trailer trucks were required to move this accumulation to the University of Georgia. This year, a significant portion was finally opened. However, the staff of the Russell Library has as much work ahead. The papers of Carl Hayden, whose forty-one years in the Senate broke all records, were severely weeded before being transferred to Arizona. Harry Truman's early Senate records were lost in 1940.

I know of a distressingly large number of senators who have made hasty, ill-considered decisions about where to deposit their papers. When questioned

about passing over an obvious repository, some senators frankly admit that the repository did not seem interested enough.

I am urging you as archivists to take on the habits of lobbyists if you hope to acquire significant and rich collections of senatorial papers. You must begin early. An initial letter ought to be followed by telephone contact with the senator's administrative assistant. Most of them are quick to recognize and appreciate an offer of help. Our office can be of some assistance at this stage. Senators will be flattered by early and frequent expressions of interest.

A discussion of congressional papers from the Washington perspective would be incomplete without a brief reference to the recent report of the National Study Commission on the Records and Documents of Federal Officials, also known as the Public Documents Commission.¹⁰ I would like to summarize briefly the recommendations for congressional papers, and give you my assessment of their chances for becoming law.

The commission devoted most of its attention to ownership and control of presidential records. Its recommendations on congressional papers were, to a large extent, shaped by a desire to be consistent with its presidential findings.

The commission agreed that the so-called "public papers" of members of Congress should be the property of the United States. It recommended that Congress develop disposition standards "to identify materials of enduring value and allow timely disposal of records that do not merit permanent retention." Members should be allowed to select their own repository and to maintain control for a period not to exceed fifteen years from the end of their federal service. Finally, the commission suggested that Congress consider providing a "small, one-time, Federal grant" to non-federal depositories receiving congressional papers to encourage adequate treatment of these materials.¹¹

Congress is not likely to act soon on these recommendations. However, they should carry great weight with those who might have questioned the enduring value to the nation of well preserved, freely accessible collections of congressional papers. The archivist has a major role to play in guaranteeing that these collections will be as rich and available as possible. The quality of research in late twentieth-century political history will be determined in large measure by the foresight and initiative of today's archivist.¹²

¹⁰ National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials, *Final Report*, March 31, 1977 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 19–22.

¹¹ National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials, "Congressional Panel Discussion," Washington, D.C., September 15, 1976.

¹² Sensitive to these concerns, the Senate plans to sponsor on September 14–15, 1978, a symposium on the Research Use and Disposition of Senators' Papers. Printed proceedings will be available early in 1979, from the Senate Historical Office, Washington, D.C. 20510.