

Floyd M. Riddick

Senate Parliamentarian, 1964-1974

Preface

*The rules of the Senate are perfect.
And if they change every one of them, the rules will be perfect.*

--Floyd M. Riddick

Washington Star, December 25, 1974

Seated immediately before the presiding officer of the Senate, on a lower dais, is the Senate Parliamentarian. Since he can be observed whispering frequently to the vice president, president pro tempore, or any other senator who happens to occupy the Chair, and since they often repeat his words verbatim in pronouncement of the rules to the Senate, the parliamentarian has been called "virtually a ventriloquist," and "the Senate's Medicine Man." Visitors to the Senate chamber, scholars studying Senate procedure, and even some senators frustrated in their legislative pursuits, have wondered about the power of the parliamentarian and the full nature of his contribution to the legislative process.

In the Senate's earlier years, senators served as their own parliamentarians and spent a considerable amount of time debating procedure on the floor. Throughout the nineteenth century, various clerks advised occasionally on parliamentary practice, but not until 1923 was the journal clerk, Charles Watkins, given the added title of "acting parliamentarian." As the legislative workload increased during the New Deal, the need for constant, experienced parliamentary advice for the presiding officers, party leaders, and sponsors and opponents of specific bills, became evident, and in 1937 Watkins' two functions were separated, making him the first full-time parliamentarian in the Senate's history.

As Watkins grew older, several senior senators became concerned over the continuity of his office, and created the office of assistant parliamentarian. Dr. Riddick was invited to join the staff as the first person to hold that post. He eventually succeeded Watkins as parliamentarian in 1964 and served until his retirement in 1974. As parliamentarian emeritus, he remained as a consultant to the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration.

Born on July 13, 1908, in Trotville, North Carolina, Floyd Riddick attended Duke University and received a B.A. He took a Masters degree at Vanderbilt in 1932, and returned to Duke to earn his Ph.D. in political science in 1935. While researching his doctoral dissertation, he spent a year observing the workings of the United States House of Representatives, a study which he eventually expanded and published as *Congressional Procedure* in 1941. Moving to Washington, first as a statistical analyst for the FERA, and then for the Rural Resettlement Administration, he continued his congressional research interests, as an instructor of political science at American University from 1936 to 1939,

and later as editor of the *Congressional Daily* for Congressional Intelligence, Inc., from 1939 to 1943. He then edited *Legislative Daily* for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce from 1943 to 1947, a project which led to an invitation to establish a "Daily Digest," in the *Congressional Record*. From 1947 to 1951, Dr. Riddick was Senate editor of the "Daily Digest," a synopsis of Congressional events which continues as a handy guide to the daily *Record*. It was from that post that he joined the office of parliamentarian, where he remained for twenty-four years. Dr. Riddick is the author of numerous books, pamphlets and articles on Congressional activities. These include *Congressional Procedure* (1941), *Congress in Action* (1948), *The U.S. Congress: Organization and Procedure* (1949), *Senate Procedure* (1958, 1964, 1974), and a series of articles summarizing the work of each Congress from the 76th through the 90th Congresses, appearing in the *American Political Science Review* and the *Western Political Quarterly*. For these interviews, Dr. Riddick came well prepared with notes, copies of bills, and transcripts of hearings, to which he referred for specific examples for discussion. Wherever possible, citations for these direct quotations follow the references. Due to the length and topical nature of the interviews, they have been arranged in chapter form for easier use. Generally, the chapters correspond to individual interviews, in the sequence in which they occurred. In a few cases, interviews were divided, when the subject changed significantly, into different chapters; and in some instances, particularly the lengthy discussions on cloture, several interviews were combined in a single chapter.

In every case a notation of the date on which the interview took place precedes the related portion of the transcript. In accordance with the standard procedure of the Senate oral history program, Dr. Riddick received preliminary copies of the transcripts for correction and clarification, but made no changes in substance. For many years, "Doc" Riddick has been a highly visible and well-known member of the Senate staff. In speeches of tribute at the time of his retirement, senators called him "the Senate's truly indispensable man," and noted that "without his daily wisdom and guidance and constant reassurance," the Senate would not have functioned as effectively as a legislative body. His office, they suggested, might have seemed a quiet one, but "it is the quiet at the center of the storm. Dr. Riddick is always at the center of every major Senate debate." These interviews constitute a seminar with him on parliamentary practices in the Senate, and offer his own unique view of the institution's history and development.

Floyd M. Riddick died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on January 25, 2000.

About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie is associate historian of the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of C.C.N.Y., he received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. He has published articles on American political history and oral history, including "Oral History in the Federal Government," which appeared in the *Journal of American History*. His books include *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (Harvard Press, 1980), *The U.S. Constitution*

United States Senate Historical Office -- Oral History Project

www.senate.gov

(Chelsea House, 1989), *History of a Free Nation* (Glencoe, 1991), and *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Harvard, 1991). He also edits the *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series)* (Government Printing Office). A former president of both the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), he received OHMAR's Forrest C. Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.
