

Francis J. Attig

Official Reporter of Debates, 1952-1974

Preface

by Donald A. Ritchie

It has often baffled me how readable the *Congressional Record* is. Not only is it readable, but also it is authoritative and is authentic, because everything that happens in the Congress is found there, and it is always in perfect order.

It baffles me when I think of the readability of the *Congressional Record*, because, when all is said and done, I think it will be agreed that Congress is really the home of the split infinitive, where it finds its finest fruition; this is the place where the dangling participle is certainly nourished; this is the home of the broken sentence; and if there were no dashes I do not know what our distinguished Official Reporters would do. This is the home where, with impunity, we can ignore the comma and the period, we can ignore the colon and the semicolon, we can ignore the exclamation mark and the question mark; and yet, somehow, out of this great funnel it all comes out right, and it is always readable. And when it goes out, in thousands of copies, to be used by high school youngsters in debate or by college debating teams or by that great concourse of people who read the *Congressional Record*, including the executive and judicial branches, it is authentic, and, above all else, it is readable; and the reason why it is readable, Mr. President, is to be found in the endeavors of the distinguished group who are the Official Reporters of Senate debates."

Everett McKinley Dirksen Congressional Record, July 31, 1963

It is not unusual for visitors to the Senate galleries to witness a largely empty chamber, with one senator presiding, another speaking, and only two or three others at their desks. In this small assembly the Reporter of Debates often stands out noticeably, hovering near the speaker and rapidly recording his words. Every ten minutes the reporter's shift changes and a new reporter appears on the floor with pen or stenographic machine to continue the note taking as the relieved reporter hurries off to transcribe his notes. By the next morning a printed copy of that speech along with all other Senate business of the day will be available in the daily *Congressional Record*. The speed and accuracy of this publication is nothing short of remarkable, even to the senators themselves, as Everett Dirksen liked to point out.

Over the years the position of Reporter of Debates has steadily evolved. Although the Senate has always maintained a journal of its proceedings, during its early years it barred all reporters from the floor. Not until 1802 were representatives of the *National Intelligencer* invited onto the floor to make notes and publish a summary of the proceedings for their newspaper. While the *Intelligencer* generally performed a creditable job, shorthand reporting was still at a primitive

stage and the results were often haphazard. Some reporters were politically biased and favored certain speakers. Some senators neglected to submit copies of their speeches or to correct the early drafts of the reporter's notes. In at least one instance a reporter dozed off during one speech and awoke during another, recording both speeches as the same.

The *National Intelligencer* held its official position by patronage, and when the political tides turned against its allies, lost the privilege of reporting debates to the *Congressional Globe* in 1833. At that time, Gales and Seaton, publishers of the *Intelligencer*, collected their notes on the earlier Congresses and commenced publication of the *Annals of Congress*, which covered the proceedings of Congress from 1789 to 1824. This publication was succeeded by the *Register of Debates in Congress*, covering 1815 to 1837, and by the *Congressional Globe*, covering 1833 to 1873.

During all these years the reporters worked directly for their newspapers. Not until 1873, when the Government Printing Office launched the *Congressional Record* did Congress hire its own reporters on the public payroll. They have remained as Senate and House employees ever since.

For those using the *Congressional Record* in their research, certain questions inevitably arise. Is the Record accurate and reliable? Does it tell what actually took place on the floor? In what ways, and for what reasons, is it or is it not strictly verbatim?

Some of these questions are answered in the oral history of Francis J. Attig, who served for twenty-two years as a reporter of debate on the Senate floor. Born in New York in 1907, Frank Attig began his career as a court reporter in West Virginia and Washington, D.C. In 1935, he joined the firm of Hart and Dice, where his duties included stenographing the hearings of several Senate committees. From 1941 to 1945, he frequently worked as a reporter for the House and Senate appropriations committees, before taking a post as a reporter for the federal district court of Washington. In 1951, James Murphy, the long-time chief Senate reporter, invited Frank Attig to join the Senate staff as a floor reporter. He accepted and began work in January 1952, holding that post until his retirement in June 1974. His was an unusual view of the Senate, literally from the center of floor activities. He was responsible to every senator for the accuracy of their recorded remarks, and to the traditions of the Senate for observing decorum and proper language in the written record, even if forgotten in the spoken debate. Throughout each session and around the clock during filibusters, Frank Attig was present, listening, watching, and recording the proceedings for history.

Francis Attig died in Washington, D.C. in 1983.

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 taught at the University College of the University

of Maryland, George Mason University, and the Northern Virginia Community College, and conducted a survey of automated bibliographical systems for the American Historical Association. He has published several articles on American political and economic history, and a book, *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980). He has also served as an officer of both the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR).
