



THE  
SENATE

1789-1989

Addresses on the History  
of the United States Senate



Robert C. Byrd  
United States Senator

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## CHAPTER 21

# The Senate in Literature and Film

May 15, 1987

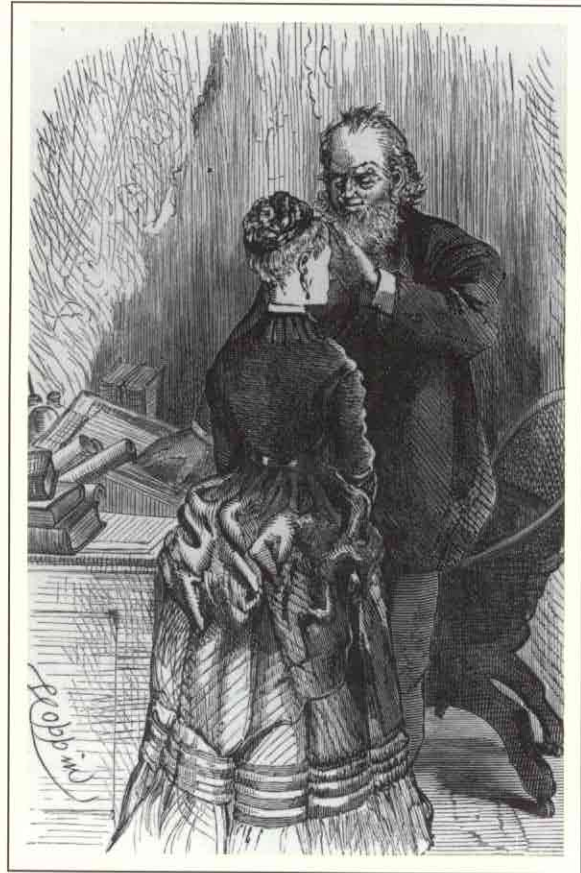
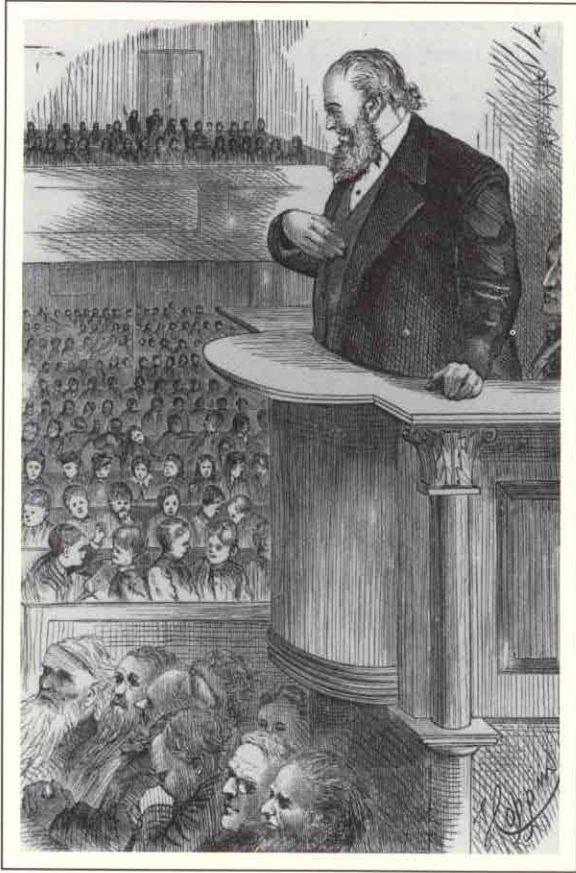
Mr. President, today in my continuing series of addresses on the history of the United States Senate, I would like to devote some attention to a special group of senators. Although widely known in their time, I dare say these senators are completely unfamiliar to most current members. They were a colorful, vibrant, compelling group who captured national attention by thrilling deeds—and misdeeds. Some were heroes, some were scoundrels, some were buffoons, and some were larger-than-life examples of how the Senate really operates. I am talking about such senators as Silas Ratcliffe, Abner Dilworthy, Cale Caldwell, Jefferson Smith, Melvin Ashton, Seab Cooley, and Solomon Spiffledink.

Senator Solomon *who?* I can see puzzled expressions on senators' faces, and there may be some perplexed clerks thumbing through their copies of the *Senate Manual*, looking under "S" for "Spiffledink." There is a Senator Spencer and a Senator Spong but no Spiffledink between them. Instead of the *Senate Manual*, they will have to consult a novel published in 1927 by a reporter in the press

gallery named Louis Ludlow. The novel is *Senator Solomon Spiffledink*, and, yes, the title character is totally fictitious, as are Senators Ratcliffe, Dilworthy, Caldwell, Smith, Ashton, and Cooley.

Over the years, the Senate has attracted the talents of many novelists, from Mark Twain to Margaret Truman, as well as Hollywood film makers, from Frank Capra to Otto Preminger, who have created memorable fictional senators and unforgettable cinematic images of the Senate. In some cases, the films and novels mirrored reality; in other cases, they distorted it for humor, suspense, satire, and pure entertainment. I suspect that more than a few senators formed their first impressions of this institution, long before their elections, by viewing *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* or reading *Advise and Consent*. Numerous visitors in our galleries were probably influenced by those same movies and books and, consequently, have felt disappointed by the less than dramatic proceedings they might have witnessed on the Senate floor. It is hard for real life senators to compete with the likes of Jimmy





Two illustrations from *The Gilded Age* show "Senator Dilworthy," left, addressing the Sunday School and, right, giving Laura his blessing.  
*M. Twain and C.D. Warner, The Gilded Age, 1902 ed.*

Stewart, William Powell, and Charles Laughton. But now, with their movies showing on other channels against the televised proceedings of the Senate, it is time we took a look at the great fictitious senators of our history.

The line between reality and fiction can be quite thin, and political novelists have regularly based their characters and stories on actual individuals and events. The *roman à clef*, a novel which makes little pretense or apology about depicting thinly disguised real people, is a mainstay of Washington literature. Indeed, part of the fun of reading this type of novel comes from trying to guess which well-known figures served as the

book's models. We can see this device in Mark Twain's and Charles Dudley Warner's classic novel of Capitol mayhem, *The Gilded Age*, first published in December 1873.

In *The Gilded Age*, Twain drew a wonderfully malicious portrait of Senator Abner Dilworthy, as pious a fraud as ever served in the Senate. Twain introduced the senator as he was giving an uplifting speech, replete with allusions to "the genius of American Liberty, walking with the Sunday School in one hand and Temperance in the other up the glorified steps of the National Capitol." One of his young protégés thought that the more he watched the senator in action, "the more he honored him, and the more conspicuously



the moral grandeur of his character appeared to stand out." But much of the story's plot involves Dilworthy's efforts to win congressional approval of an unsavory private bill from which he and his friends would benefit handsomely. In these efforts, the senator was assisted by a beautiful and crafty female lobbyist, Laura Hawkins. At one point, Miss Hawkins expressed her concern that critical newspaper editorials would defeat their bill, but Dilworthy gave her a lesson in Gilded Age political science:

Oh, not at all, not at all, my child. It is just what we want. . . . Give us newspaper persecution enough, and we are safe. Vigorous persecution will alone carry a bill sometimes, dear; and when you start with a strong vote in the first place, persecution comes in with double effect. It scares off some of the weak supporters, true, but it soon turns strong ones into stubborn ones. And then, presently, it changes the tide of public opinion. The great public is weak-minded; the great public is sentimental. . . . In a word, the great putty-hearted public loves to "gush," and there is no such darling opportunity to gush as a case of persecution affords.

The bill moved inexorably through the House of Representatives, but suddenly the unexpected occurred—just as his state legislature was on the verge of reelecting Dilworthy, Mr. Noble, a member of the legislature, produced seven thousand dollars which he claimed the senator gave as a bribe for his vote. Shocked, the legislature elected another candidate, and the Senate rejected Dilworthy's private bill. "Newspapers, and everybody else," called the senator "a pious hypocrite, a sleek, oily fraud, a reptile who manipulated temperance movements, prayer meetings, Sunday Schools, public charities, missionary enterprises, all for his private benefit." Just when all seemed lost for the senator, however, he brazenly offered a resolution appointing a special Senate committee to investigate the allegations against him.

When the resolution carried and the committee was appointed, the newspapers immediately attacked the ploy and reviled the Senate with blistering force:

Under the guise of appointing a committee to investigate . . . Dilworthy, the Senate yesterday appointed a committee to *investigate his accuser, Mr. Noble*. . . . That Mr. Dilworthy had the effrontery to offer such a resolution will surprise no one, and that the Senate could entertain it without blushing and pass it without shame will surprise no one. We are now reminded of a note which we have received from the notorious burglar Murphy, in which he finds fault with a statement of ours to the effect that he had served one term in the penitentiary and also one in the U.S. Senate. He says, "The latter statement is untrue and does me great injustice." After an unconscious sarcasm like that, further comment is unnecessary.

Instead of castigating their fellow member for his gross violation of senatorial ethics, Dilworthy's colleagues on the committee turned their fire on his accuser, Mr. Noble, for having received a bribe! Dilworthy finished out his term and returned home to a "grand ovation" from his friends who declared "that he was still good enough for them."<sup>1</sup>

Now, Mr. President, we might say: "My goodness, what a fertile imagination Mark Twain had! Surely no United States senator could have been so hypocritical, so cynical, so boldly corrupt, and no Senate committee could have behaved so outrageously. This must be an example of literary license—a broad, sweeping satire." But, alas, the sad truth is that Senator Abner Dilworthy was based on a very real United States senator, Samuel Pomeroy of Kansas. And, for the most part, the events Mark Twain described in *The Gilded Age* actually took place.

During the winter of 1867–1868, Mark Twain sat in the press gallery in this chamber, writing articles for newspapers, acting as personal secretary to Nevada's Senator Wil-





The fictional "Senator Dilworthy" was based on the real Senator Samuel Pomeroy.

*U.S. Senate Historical Office*

liam Stewart, and collecting material he would later incorporate into his first novel. In 1870, Twain returned to Washington and there, by chance, had dinner with Senator Pomeroy.

Samuel Pomeroy was one of the breed known in those days as a Radical Republican, meaning that he supported rigorous reconstruction of the South. He also made a name for himself in the temperance and Sunday school movements, but this pious reputation was ingloriously stripped away when, in 1873, just as Twain was writing his book, Pomeroy was accused of offering an eight-thousand-dollar bribe to ensure his reelection to the Senate. His party convention unanimously refused to renominate him, but a select Senate committee declined to condemn Pomeroy's attempted bribery and attacked his accusers instead. As Justin Kaplan, Twain's biographer, wrote, "Senator Abner Dilworthy of *The Gilded Age* is Pomeroy undisguised, unmistakable to contemporary

readers." Kaplan added that "Pomeroy-Dilworthy became a comic-corrupt archetype which Mark Twain jeered at all his life and which survives today."<sup>2</sup>

Seven years after *The Gilded Age* appeared, Henry Adams anonymously published a shining gem of a Washington novel, entitled *Democracy*. The great-grandson of President John Adams and grandson of President John Quincy Adams, Henry Adams felt alienated from an America that was madly pursuing wealth and ignoring the old patrician class that he represented. The evolution of the United States from General Washington to General Grant, said Adams in a famous quip, proved Darwin wrong. Brooding in his home on Lafayette Square over this course of events, Adams wrote *Democracy* to express his dismay over American national politics. His chief senatorial protagonist, Senator Silas Ratcliffe, resembled Twain's Abner Dilworthy in several respects: both were venal politicians masquerading as pious statesmen and both were immensely popular and powerful political leaders. Both were brought low by the end of the novel and both were drawn from real life senators. Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe, "the Prairie Giant of Peonia," clearly depicted Senator James G. Blaine, "the Plumed Knight of Maine."

*Democracy* tells the story of Mrs. Lightfoot Lee, a socialite widow who decided to spend the winter in the city of Washington. Mrs. Lee was eager to see how the tremendous forces of government worked, but what she really wanted was power. She differed much from her sister Sybil in dress, ornaments, tastes, and interests. To Sybil, politics was of little interest, and although she was once induced to go to the Capitol and to sit ten minutes in the Senate gallery, according to Adams: "to her mind the Senate was a place where people went to recite speeches, and she naively assumed that the speeches were useful and had a purpose, but as they did not



interest her she never went again. This is a very common conception of Congress; many congressmen share it."

Mrs. Lee, however, was more patient and bolder. She visited the Capitol from time to time and read the debates in the *Congressional Record*. Interested in the machinery of government, she sought to understand its operation and the quality of the men who controlled it.

Presently, Mrs. Lee met power in the form of Silas Ratcliffe. "What a pity he is so dreadfully senatorial," she remarked, "otherwise I rather admire him." Senator Ratcliffe, however, was immediately infatuated with the lady, it being "a historical fact that elderly senators have had a curious fascination for young and handsome women," and proceeded to instruct her in the ways democratic government actually works. Things are not always what they seem, he explained. Once, as governor of his state during the Civil War, he rigged an election, but his purpose was to prevent the "peace party" from carrying his state and denying Lincoln's election. "I am not proud of the transaction," he told her, "but I would do it again, and worse than that, if I thought it would save this country from disunion."

In the novel's most memorable vignette, Mrs. Lee journeyed to Mount Vernon with Senator Ratcliffe, where they discussed the first president's monumental character. Mrs. Lee asked, "Was he then the only honest public man we ever had?" Ratcliffe responded:

Public men cannot be dressing themselves today in Washington's old clothes. If Washington were President now, he would have to learn our ways or lose the next election. Only fools and theorists imagine that our society can be handled with gloves or long poles. One must make one's self a part of it. If virtue won't answer our purpose, we must use vice, or our opponents will put us out of office, and this was as true in Washington's day as it is now, and always will be.

By the end of the book, Senator Ratcliffe proposed marriage. "In politics we cannot keep our hands clean," he prefaced his proposal by explaining. "I have done many things in my political career that are not defensible."

Adams' disappointment in the American political scene and in the politicians of his day was reflected in the musings of Mrs. Lee as she searched both soul and conscience for the answer to Ratcliffe's proposal of marriage:

The audacity of the man would have seemed sublime if she had felt sure that he knew the difference between good and evil, between a lie and the truth; but the more she saw of him, the surer she was that his courage was mere moral paralysis, and that he talked about virtue and vice as a man who is colorblind talks about red and green; . . . Was it politics that had caused this atrophy of the moral senses by disuse?

But Ratcliffe suggested that she could help him reform politics and enjoy a taste of the power she craved. As she wavered over this intriguing offer, Mrs. Lee discovered another of the senator's past political intrigues, a case in which he demanded money to move certain legislation out of a committee he chaired—an incident similar in some respects, although different in details, from the real Senator James G. Blaine's financial transactions with the railroads. When confronted with this story, Ratcliffe, as usual, had a rationalization. In this case, he claimed that he was just raising campaign money to keep the government from passing "into the bloodstained hands of rebels," but Mrs. Lee rejected the excuse. When the senator desperately offered to leave politics and become minister to England, thus giving his new wife high social position in London, she interpreted this suggestion as a "gross attempt to bribe her with office." Spurned, Senator Ratcliffe rushed out of the house and, on the front steps, received a final humiliation from



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*J. Keppler*

"THE BEST OF FRIENDS MUST PART."

J. G. B., (aside). — He thinks I mean it!  
Puck, (aloud). — He thinks I believe it!

Senator James G. Blaine served as the model for the character of "Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe."

*Keppler/Puck, February 22, 1888*



an elderly diplomat who struck him with his cane. One suspects that Henry Adams, descendant of an old and cast-aside political family, who detested James G. Blaine and the new class of politicians he represented, took particular pleasure in writing this scene. But the novel ends without triumph, with Mrs. Lee concluding that "nine out of ten of our countrymen would say I had made a mistake." <sup>3</sup>

Mr. President, to my list of thinly disguised fictional senators from the nineteenth century, I should like to add one more: Senator Norton, who appeared in the obscure Washington novel, *A Man and His Soul*, written in 1894 by Theron Crawford. Like Mark Twain, Crawford served for a time as a newspaper correspondent in the Senate press gallery, but there the comparison stops. Crawford lacked Twain's talent, and his books have been forgotten. Yet, this particular book is valuable because its author, as a newspaper correspondent, had things he wanted to say that he could not put into his dispatches. There was always the threat of libel, of physical retribution, and of losing one's sources. In a novel, the correspondent could write more freely.

Theron Crawford reported for Democratic newspapers but had grown close to the Republican James G. Blaine, making him a character in the novel. But the Blaine depicted in *A Man and His Soul* differs markedly from the detestable Silas Ratcliffe of *Democracy*. Here he appears as Ralph Granger, cabinet member and personal friend of the book's journalist-hero (Blaine served as secretary of state in the Garfield, Arthur, and Harrison administrations). Secretary Granger "had too much intelligence to be involved in . . . vulgar intrigue for place," the journalist wrote, but Granger's wife was "so ambitious of social position as to be absolutely reckless in reaching for the object of her desires. . . . Her husband's modest fortune must have

been insufficient to satisfy her requirements, and I had noticed, within the last year, associated with her, from time to time, the oily and diplomatic stars of political intrigue, the aristocratic purveyors of position." Their nearness to Mrs. Granger had led the reporter "to think that she was in danger of selling her fair name and the honorable position of her husband in her reckless desire to have money." In reality, Blaine and his wife Harriet lived and entertained considerably beyond the earnings of a public servant, and it was the need for outside sources of income that had led Blaine into his many private and politically disastrous financial dealings.

The villain of Crawford's book was neither Granger nor his wife, but the fictional Senator Norton who discovered financial irregularities in Secretary Granger's department and used this knowledge during his power struggle with the president of the United States. Senator Norton was quite a character. Here is how Crawford introduced him, in the lobby of a posh Washington hotel:

There came into the group about the open fire a statesman, long famed, in the House, for his cynical ability, his wit, his readiness in debate and his colossal vanity, which made him more cruel and ungrateful than a peacock. . . . His spare, slight figure was clothed in evening dress, over which he wore a long fur-lined overcoat, which descended nearly to his heels. His dark, olive-tinted, hard-lined face was shadowed by a long mustache and short beard. A dark evening hat was cocked rakishly over one ear. A dark perfecto cigar was held tightly in one corner of his grinning mouth.

Isn't that a perfect description of one of those villains who was always tying the heroine to the railroad tracks in stage melodramas? But, in fact, the passage also described New York Senator Roscoe Conkling, Blaine's chief political enemy.

Should anyone challenge my interpretation of Conkling as Norton, let me cite this





According to author Theron Crawford, Senator Roscoe Conkling, depicted here as Mephistopheles, "swaggered through the debate of Congress."

*Kepler/Puck, October 3, 1877*

passage from *A Man and His Soul*, in which Crawford described the reporter's view from the press gallery: "Senator Norton came into his seat, fresh from one of the bath-rooms below the Senate, curled and perfumed by the official barber, radiant with health, physical superiority and intellectual pride. He fairly swaggered down the aisle of the Senate chamber, and took his seat with an aggressive air of insolence." What a vivid picture! Compare that description of Norton with one of Roscoe Conkling, taken from a biography of James G. Blaine that Crawford had published a year earlier. Before Conkling's great speeches, Crawford wrote, the senator always appeared "fresh from a plunge in the marble bath-tubs in the basement of the Capitol building; curled, scented and insolent, he swaggered through the debate of Congress." The descriptions, of course, are strikingly similar. This was the senator whom one woman admirer called "the Apollo of the Senate" and whom enemies dubbed "the curled darling of Utica."

Beyond his bathing habits, the fictitious Senator Norton further resembles the real Senator Conkling in his monumental battle with a president of his own party over patronage. Crawford described a meeting with Norton in the senator's lavish hotel suite, filled with potted plants from the government's Botanic Garden. Norton, he said, "divided the world into two classes: those who adhered to him, and those who opposed him. For the former, he was always willing to work; for the latter, he was untiring in his ferocious energy to destroy. It was not enough for him to defeat an enemy. It was necessary for his complete satisfaction to absolutely annihilate him." Pacing up and down in the room, speaking in a low tone that gradually increased in volume, Norton outlined his relations with the president, who had once been one of his political lieutenants. One might easily imagine that



Crawford was alluding to Chester A. Arthur, the accidental president. Arthur had, as one of Conkling's top political henchmen, previously presided over the New York Customs House, which formed Conkling's principal power base with its enormous patronage booty of more than a thousand jobs. A quirk of fate had elevated Arthur to the White House, where he was trying to chart an honorable, independent course in espousing civil service reform. The fictional senator accused the president of forgetting "all past alliances, all previous friendships, all prior obligations of duty and loyalty."

Senator Norton expressed outrage at this unexpected presidential independence. He insisted that, if the president failed to make certain appointments, he would expose the financial irregularities in Secretary Granger's department and drive Granger from the cabinet. Although the president depended greatly on Granger's advice, he was a weak but proud man who had "no loyalty of character, and would sacrifice Granger tomorrow, in a moment, if he could do it without scandal, rather than make the slightest concession to Norton." Through a devious channel, word reached Secretary Granger, who took the blame to cover for his wife's crimes but rebuked her sharply. The mortified woman staggered to her room, collapsed, struck her head on the mantle, and fell dead in the fireplace—this was a Victorian novel, after all!

The journalist-author delivered his own rebuke to Conkling and other senators of the era in the lament of one of his characters, who complained: "I have never known a time in the history of the Senate when there was so much silly, boyish quarreling about nothing, and such an absolute forgetting of all of our real duties." Crawford's observations about the senators' failure to adhere faithfully to the rules of their own august body in the days antedating our own century were quite correct, as we can see from his

reference to the executive sessions in which nominations and treaties were considered.

The executive sessions of the Senate are secret only in name . . . , their transactions might as well be conducted in open day. The senators are, practically, on their honor, not to tell what occurs during these sessions; but no method has ever been discovered for making more than fourscore men keep secrets, and so full details of everything leaks out, in some irregular way, within the shortest possible time after each session is closed.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, these three Gilded Age political novels indicted the Senate for conduct unbecoming a national legislature. In their way, these books helped to reshape public opinion and prepare for direct election of senators and other reforms of the Progressive Era.

Mr. President, I have used these three novels as a small sample of the popular Washington *roman à clef*. I would like to turn now to a different genre of political novel: the senatorial murder mystery. Nearly everyone loves a good mystery as an occasional diversion. Intricate plots, littered with clues and frequent red herrings, engage our attention, no matter what the literary merits of the book at hand. Not all mystery stories take place in English country houses or on isolated islands. The Capitol Building has housed many a foul and treacherous crime, according to certain mystery writers, and senators have been likely suspects as murderers—and victims. An old stage adage says that, if you introduce a gun in a plot, it has to be fired during the performance. That seems to be equally true for senators: they are too significant to be just another member of the cast. If you put a senator into a whodunit, he probably did it. What awful motive would lead a United States senator to commit such a crime? Surprisingly, senatorial murders are more often provoked by family quarrels than political struggles. One suspects that novelists just cannot believe that any political or

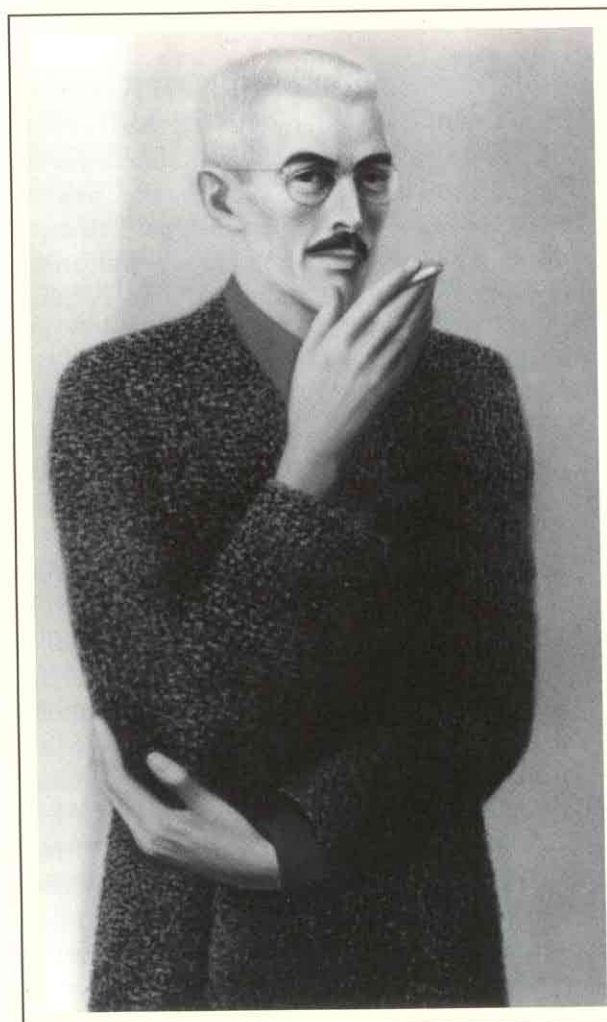


ideological issue matters enough to serve as a motive for murder. They ought to spend some time in our cloakrooms!

Let me offer three sinister examples of this fictional Senate, beginning in chronological order with perhaps the greatest American detective novelist, Dashiell Hammett. Hammett is most famous for his creation of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* and Nick and Nora Charles in *The Thin Man*, but let us focus instead on Senator Ralph Bancroft Henry, who appeared in *The Glass Key*, published in 1931. Senator Henry, "one of the few aristocrats left in American politics," was running for reelection and desperately needed the support of party boss Paul Madvig. The boss also happened to be dating the senator's daughter—much to the disgust of the senator's son, Taylor. When Taylor was found dead, his skull crushed by a blunt instrument, Boss Madvig became the prime suspect. Ned Beaumont, a special investigator for the district attorney's office, set out to clear his friend.

Who killed Taylor Henry? Although it is considered poor form to give away the ending of a murder mystery, I hope I will be forgiven for revealing that Beaumont fingered Senator Henry as the perpetrator. The motive remained ambiguous. Although the senator finally confessed to killing his son accidentally, after the young man had chased the boss out into the street, Beaumont suspected that the senator acted in a fit of anger because his son interfered with his chances for reelection.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately for Dashiell Hammett, *The Glass Key* was not his last encounter with the United States Senate. Hammett's politics were far to the left of center and, during the 1930's, he had flirted with communism. During the dark days of the Red Scare of the 1940's and 1950's, the author was called up before the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Senate Permanent Sub-



Author Dashiell Hammett made a senator a main character in his novel *The Glass Key*.  
*National Portrait Gallery*

committee on Investigations to answer for his political beliefs and to name his associates. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin shamelessly grilled Hammett, who held no government post and was hardly in a position to subvert his country. McCarthy's henchmen Roy Cohn and David Schine toured United States Information Agency libraries overseas, urging them to remove such nonpolitical books as *The Maltese Falcon* from their shelves. Hammett went to prison rather than name names. This was one case where truth was stranger than fiction.



Unlike Hammett's homicidal Senator Henry, Senator Leander Rhodes was an innocent victim, blown to bits by an exploding log in the fireplace of his Massachusetts Avenue mansion. This shocking crime occurred in Edgar Box's 1953 novel *Death Before Bedtime*. I chose this mystery because Edgar Box was the alias for Gore Vidal, grandson of United States Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma. Vidal has also written about many real-life senators in his four historical novels *Lincoln*, *Burr*, *1876*, and *Washington, D.C.* (Hubert Humphrey even made an appearance in Vidal's bizarre novel *Duluth*).

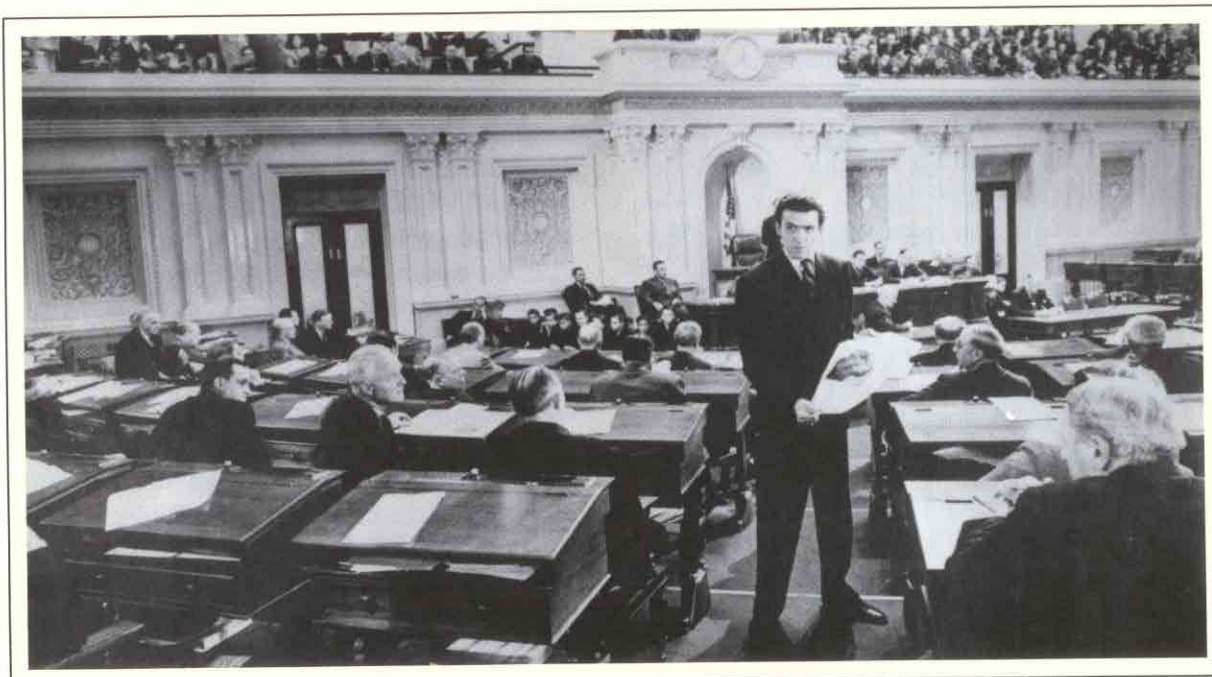
In *Death Before Bedtime*, Vidal created the reactionary Leander Rhodes, chairman of the Senate Spoils and Patronage Committee, described at one point as having a "face red from speechmaking, his gray hair tangled above his bloodshot eyes." The senator was preparing to announce his candidacy for president in a speech before the National Margarine Council but, before he could make the announcement, he stopped to light the fateful fire at his Massachusetts Avenue home. Since Vidal described Rhodes as "a near-idiot with a perfect Senate record of obstruction," his demise is hard to mourn. The only surprise is that the senator was done in by a member of his family, rather than by some irate citizen determined to save the Republic.<sup>6</sup>

From a mystery by Senator Thomas Gore's grandson, let me turn to one by President Harry Truman's daughter. In 1981, Margaret Truman published *Murder on Capitol Hill*, one of a series of mysteries in which she has strewn bodies throughout Washington, from the White House to the Supreme Court and from the Smithsonian to Georgetown. In this tale, we find the Senate majority leader, Cale Caldwell, stabbed to death with an ice pick at a Senate reception! Not just your ordinary, run-of-the-mill majority leader, Senator Caldwell was also chairman of the "Appropriations

Committee on the Interior and Related Agencies." I submit that anyone who tried to serve as majority leader and, simultaneously, to chair a major standing committee would find himself violently threatened by members of his own party! I would have advised the police to begin their investigation by interviewing members of the Appropriations Committee, in order of seniority. But, in the end, it turned out that the senator's family was behind the murder, rather than his colleagues. The moral of these senatorial mysteries, one gathers, is that we should avoid getting so wrapped up in our work that we neglect our homelife—it could be dangerous to our health.<sup>7</sup>

Mr. President, I might also mention *Washington Post* reporter Lawrence Meyer's murder mystery *A Capitol Crime*, in which a former United States senator persuaded a fanatical admirer to bump off an investigative reporter and stuff his body down a manhole in the Capitol basement. Now this is an interesting scenario—one which many members of the Senate may have contemplated over the years. Granted that a few congressmen, generally in the nineteenth century, of course, responded to criticism in the press by using their fists and canes on the heads of offending journalists, members of Congress, for the most part, have acted with admirable restraint. Not one of them has ever killed or conspired to kill a representative of the fourth estate! On the other hand, in 1890, a reporter by the name of Charles E. Kincaid did shoot a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Kentucky named William Preston Taulbee inside this Capitol Building. Taulbee died from the effects of the wounds eleven days later. Their feud was personal with considerable provocation on the former congressman's part, but I understand that some members of the House press gallery have formed a Kincaid society to commemorate his crime. I point out this inci-





This scene from *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* takes place in a replica of the Senate chamber as it appeared in the 1930's. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures

dent only to alert future mystery writers not to be so quick to pin blame on the senators.<sup>8</sup>

Turning from these grisly stories to more pleasant images, I would like to mention the way motion pictures have made the United States Senate their stage and senators their players. The three films I have chosen for home entertainment viewing on videocassette are those that were shown recently in "The Senate Goes to the Movies" series, sponsored by the Senate Commission on Art. I shall briefly describe each of the three: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *The Senator Was Indiscreet*, and *Advise and Consent*.

Has there ever been a better movie about the Senate than Frank Capra's 1939 classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*? To briefly summarize the plot, the naive, idealistic Jefferson Smith, played by James Stewart, was appointed to fill out the term of a senator who died unexpectedly. Smith placed himself under the care and supervision of his silky

senior senator, Joseph Paine, portrayed by Claude Rains. The party bosses expected to control Smith but, when they arrived in Washington, he eluded them to go off sight-seeing at all the patriotic memorials, and they discovered that they had their hands full with their junior senator. Unbeknownst to Senator Smith, his senior colleague was pushing legislation to build a dam which would financially benefit the state political boss of their party (the dam was to be located on the very site where Smith intended to build a Boy Rangers' camp). When Smith uncovered the truth, Senator Paine maneuvered to discredit him and have him expelled from the Senate. In a last desperate effort, Smith launched a filibuster to stall Senate action until he could demonstrate that the public (and the Boy Rangers) supported him.

The movie includes many shots actually taken in the Russell Senate Office Building and in the vicinity of the Capitol, and much



of the action takes place in a magnificent reproduction of the Senate chamber. In fact, if we wish to see how this chamber, in which we meet today, looked before its massive renovation in 1950, *Mr. Smith* gives us that opportunity. Technically, the movie is authentic, accurate, and generally true to the procedures of that day, thanks to the advice that James Preston, superintendent of the Senate press gallery, provided to the movie crew. In the climactic scenes of the movie, Senator Smith's secretary—indeed his only staff person—played by Jean Arthur, sat just to the right of the press gallery, signaling down to the senator which rules would enable him to hold the floor, much to the bemusement of the vice president, who was presiding. Finally, the strain became too great, and Senator Smith collapsed, here on the floor, in front of the Republican leader's desk. So shaken was Senator Paine by this performance, that, in the cloakroom, he attempted to shoot himself. At the movie's end, he admitted his guilt, clearing Jefferson Smith, who still lay crumpled on the floor. There is not a dry eye left in the house, but it is safe to say that no such scene ever has taken place, or ever will, in this chamber.

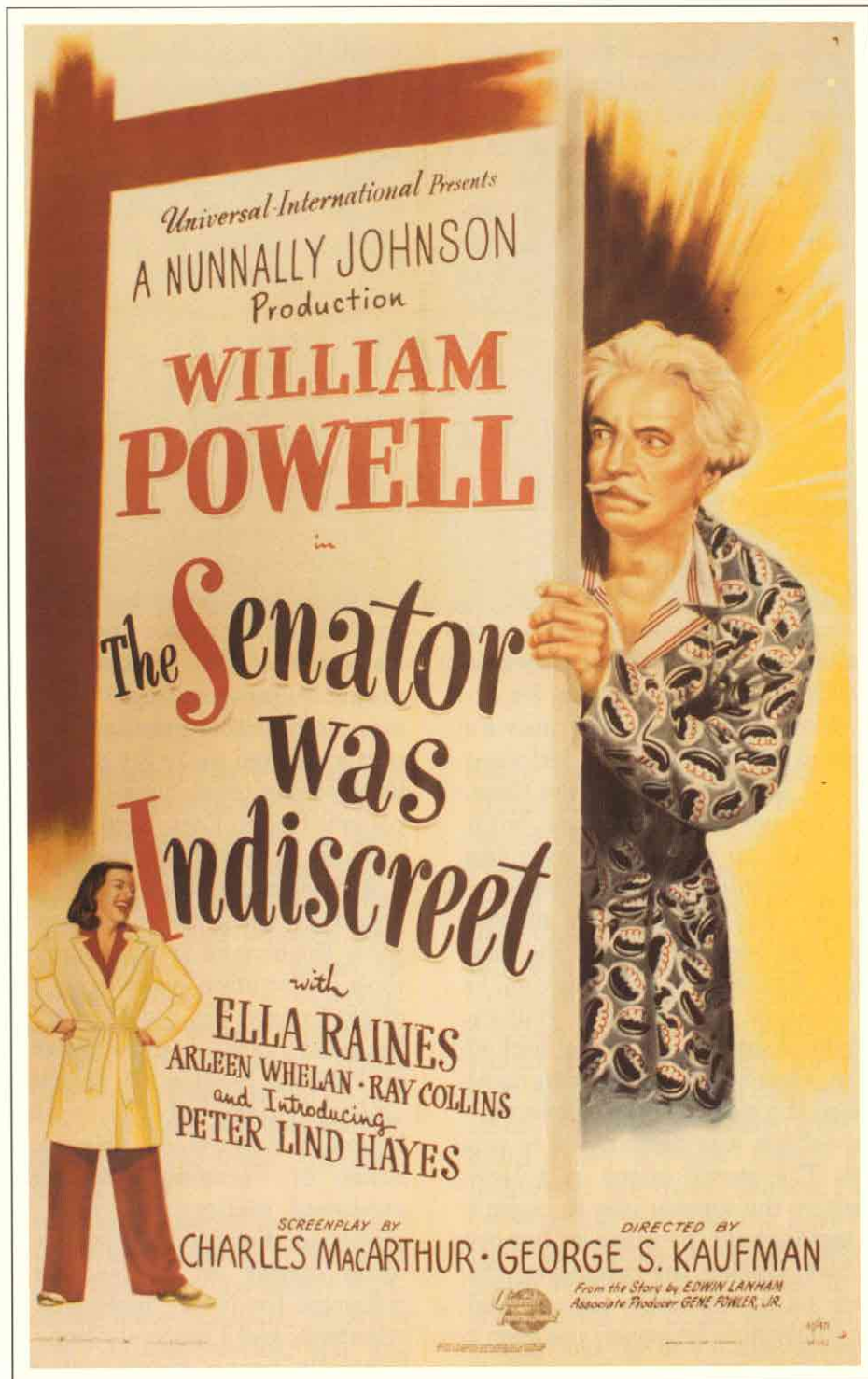
Similarly, there has never been a senator quite as foolish as Melvin Ashton, the lead role in George Kaufman's 1947 movie *The Senator Was Indiscreet*. Played by William Powell, Melvin Ashton may have looked senatorial, but, clearly, no coherent thought had ever passed through his head. Nevertheless, Senator Ashton was determined to run for president. The movie opens in a New York hotel where the senator was to make a speech and, incidentally, be made an honorary Indian chief. During the ceremony, the senator's irate party chairman arrived and demanded to know how he could take such a step without party approval. Kissing babies was one thing, but becoming an Indian chief was strictly for presidential candidates.

Moreover, Ashton had been denying in public that he would be a presidential candidate, and the party boss pointed out that only real candidates were permitted to deny their candidacies.

Senator Ashton refused to be dissuaded. He announced that he had been keeping a diary, recording everything that he had seen and exposing party machinations. The shaken party leader, realizing that publication of such a diary could topple his machine, agreed to let Ashton run. To everyone's surprise, the senator moved quickly to the top of the public opinion polls. Among his campaign slogans: he opposed both inflation and deflation and, instead, stood for "flation." As a publicity stunt, he rode in the locomotive of his campaign train, which he managed to wreck, but then received credit for helping to rescue the survivors! At the last minute, when it appeared that this improbable senator might become an even more improbable president, a newspaper reporter spirited away his diary and published its shocking revelations. The senator and his cohorts fled to Pago Pago and anywhere else without an extradition treaty.

It must come as a surprise to audiences—especially since the movie's advertisements show the senator in his pajamas—that Ashton's indiscretion was merely that he kept a diary. In fact, I'm sad to say, diary keeping has been a rare art in the Senate. One thinks of William Maclay of Pennsylvania, John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, Henry Fountain Ashurst of Arizona, and George Aiken of Vermont, who maintained and published diaries. But most members are simply too busy to keep such a record. Senatorial diaries, of course, are tremendous resources for future historians and political scientists, and I sincerely hope that this delightfully funny movie will not dissuade any senator from committing such an "indiscretion."





The fictional "Senator Ashton" in *The Senator Was Indiscreet* kept a diary implicating his party bosses in political chicanery. Copyright 1947, Universal Pictures Co., Inc.



The final film that I would like to highlight is the late Otto Preminger's 1962 masterpiece *Advise and Consent*, the movie version of Allen Drury's Pulitzer prize-winning novel of the same name. As with the nineteenth-century *roman à clef*, part of the joy of Drury's novel, and Preminger's movie, is guessing who is really who. Like Mark Twain and Theron Crawford, Allen Drury served as a reporter in the Senate press gallery, where he collected many of his ideas, characters, and situations. A few years after he published *Advise and Consent*, Drury also published a diary (shades of Melvin Ashton!) which he kept while covering the Senate during World War II. This diary provides a road map for his novel, with numerous directional signs. One may fancy that the aging fictional president strongly resembles Franklin D. Roosevelt at the end of his presidency. The vice president, Harley Hudson, could be seen as Harry Truman. The dashing majority leader, something of a lady's man, seems to be Alben Barkley of Kentucky, and the upright minority leader, Orrin Knox, appears to be Ohio's Robert Taft. Old Seab Cooley, the southern senator who is played so magnificently by Charles Laughton in the movie, is a dead ringer for Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee, and Cooley's battle with presidential nominee Robert Leffingwell resembles McKellar's campaign against David Lilienthal, with perhaps the nomination of Henry Wallace to be secretary of commerce thrown in for good measure. The overzealous Senator Fred Van Ackerman is a caricature of Joseph McCarthy, and the tragic Brigham Anderson, who kills himself in his Senate office, reminds us of Senator Lester Hunt of Wyoming, who took his life in the Russell Building in 1954.<sup>9</sup>

For those of us who love the United States Senate, *Advise and Consent* is a special treat. There are scenes of the Senate's old wicker subway cars, of the trolleys that used to run

down Constitution Avenue, of the Senate Caucus Room, and even of the tour guides in the Capitol. And again, much of the action takes place in the Senate chamber, lovingly recreated by Hollywood. Although this new set reflected the renovations made to the Senate chamber in 1950, *Advise and Consent* was able to utilize the same Senate chamber desks and chairs that were constructed for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Both the book and the movie *Advise and Consent* center on the president's nomination of Robert Leffingwell to be secretary of state. Leffingwell was a bright but prickly figure, deeply resented by Senator Seab Cooley for an old slight. The Senate majority leader was also not happy with the nomination, since he had not been consulted, but he loyally agreed to lead the fight for confirmation. Senator Brigham Anderson of Utah chaired the Foreign Relations Committee's subcommittee handling the nomination. During the course of the hearings, Seab Cooley produced a witness who swore that Leffingwell once belonged to a Communist cell. Although the charge was true, Leffingwell—who had long since changed his political philosophy—covered up his past and discredited his accuser. Meanwhile, Senator Van Ackerman, an extreme peace promoter who had embraced Leffingwell's nomination, uncovered a terrible secret in Anderson's past, which he used to blackmail the subcommittee chairman. Rather than submit to blackmail, yet unable to face the public humiliation, Senator Anderson committed suicide. The vote in the Senate on the nomination was tied, and Vice President Hudson was preparing to cast the deciding vote when he received a message that the president had died. Hudson withheld his vote, thus allowing the Leffingwell nomination to be rejected, on the grounds that he would want to appoint his own secretary of state. He then left the Senate chamber to go to the White House.





Otto Preminger is shown directing the action on the set of the Senate chamber during the filming of *Advise and Consent*.  
*Otto Preminger Films*

As with *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Advise and Consent* is technically quite accurate. The studio went to great pains to recreate the appropriate settings and made every effort to capture the flavor of the Senate. The actions of the senators and presiding officer are a bit exaggerated, however, and, in several instances, not in keeping with the rules of the real Senate, as when Senator Van Ackerman couples a discharge motion, which must lie over for a day, with a motion to vote on the discharged nomination "here and now." Such a motion would be declared out of order by the presiding officer of the Senate. Also somewhat unreal was the vice president's question, stated three times: "Do I hear a request for the yeas and nays?" This is

a question which is never asked by the chair in the Senate. Then, too, the majority leader's motion that the Senate stand adjourned "until further notice" would be difficult to envision under the circumstances, since it would hardly conform to the constitutional requirement that neither house shall, without the consent of the other, adjourn "for more than three days." But what the heck! Perhaps these peccadilloes can be forgiven on the basis that too rigid a conformity to the real-life Senate would be intensely boring and, thus, hurtful to box-office receipts in the motion picture industry!

The only remaining criticism, then, that one might have of both films is that they show the chamber almost always filled with





Actor Charles Laughton, in white suit, was filmed on location outside the Russell Senate Office Building for the movie *Advise and Consent*.  
*U.S. Senate Historical Office*

senators, all sitting at their desks. Anyone who has spent any time in the galleries knows that this is somewhat unreal in that only a few senators are present on the floor at almost any given time. The rest are off at committee hearings and any number of other official duties. Great numbers of senators are on the floor, generally, only during votes. Even then, instead of sitting orderly at their desks, they tend to mill about in groups, conversing with their colleagues, waiting to cast their votes and learn the outcome of the tally. Apparently, such a scene was too confusing for the movie companies to recreate. I expect, however, that after the public has been conditioned to our behavior by viewing our own proceedings on television, the next

major movie about the Senate will be able to portray this aspect of the chamber in a way that is more true to life.

Mr. President, my brief literary and cinematic tour of the Senate has included merely a few examples. There are so many other works that could be cited, among them the great Appalachian writer Harry Caudill's *The Senator from Slaughter County*, Allen Drury's *Senator Mark Coffin*, and the Alan Alda film *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*. Most likely, other senators have their own favorite Senate novels and movies. I would like to conclude my remarks, however, by returning to Senator Spiffledink. More full of bunk than Melvin Ashton, more naive than Jefferson Smith, more hypocritical than Abner Dilworthy,





This illustration of "Senator Solomon Spiffledink" shows the senator "as he is today, at the full meridian of his powers." L. Ludlow, *Senator Solomon Spiffledink*

more vainglorious than Senator Norton, Solomon Spiffledink was a wicked caricature by—whom else?—a reporter in the press gallery, Louis Ludlow. I will not attempt to summarize this amusing little book but would like to quote from the author's introduction. Ludlow writes:

I freely admit that this child of my brain, *Senator Solomon Spiffledink*, shows Congress at its worst. That is exactly what it is intended to do. But it also shows that, even at its worst, Congress is only afflicted with some of the human frailties and is not so very bad after all. . . . In presenting *Senator Solomon Spiffledink* to a critical public, I ask my readers not to regard Solomon as any particular individual, for the truth is that he is a composite, nor to make this book a basis for too harsh a judgment of Congress until they have read its forthcoming companion piece, *Senator John Law*. When John makes his appearance in literary garb I shall hope to see the scales exactly balanced.<sup>10</sup>

That is a nice sentiment, Mr. President, but, in fact, no such novel as *Senator John Law* was ever published. It seems to be easier to lampoon the Senate than to praise it. News reporting and political novels generally lean towards the spectacular and the negative, leaving history and political science to remind us of the positive. Those who have been fortunate enough to serve in the United States Senate have to expect such treatment, and we hope we have thick enough skins to laugh along with other readers and moviegoers at the egregious foibles of fictional senators. Sometimes, however, the tables can be turned. One reason why Ludlow never wrote *Senator John Law*, other than our suspicion that a name like that would signify a perfectly dreadful novel, was that, in 1928, Ludlow himself was elected to the United States House of Representatives, where he served for twenty years. More recently, movie actors have also begun running for national office and winning. So, perhaps, the moral of this story for the artistic community is: be careful about how you portray Congress in your novels and films, for you never know when you may decide to run for office yourself. You may wind up as the subject of your own barbs.