

George A. Smathers
United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969
Oral History Interview
U.S. Senate Historical Office

PREFACE

George Armistead Smathers served two terms in the United States House of Representatives, from 1947 to 1951, and three terms in the United States Senate, from 1951 to 1969, as a Democrat from Florida. Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on November 14, 1913, he moved with his family to Miami, Florida in 1920. After attending public schools in Dade County, he enrolled in the University of Florida. When he graduated in 1936 he was named “best all-round man” of his class. Two years later he received his law degree from the University of Florida and entered private practice. He served as assistant U.S. district attorney in Miami from 1940 until he was commissioned in the U.S. Marine Corps in May 1942. Discharged as a major in October, 1945, he became special assistant to U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark.

In the Democratic primary of 1946, George Smathers defeated incumbent Representative Pat Cannon to win election to the House of Representatives. Four years later, he unseated Senator Claude Pepper in a legendary primary campaign, long the subject of political commentary and misrepresentation. Senator Smathers won reelection in 1956 and 1962 with little or no opposition, and served until his retirement in January, 1969.

As a senator, George Smathers became a close friend and ally of Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1956, during the absence of Johnson’s whip, Earle Clements, and following Johnson’s heart attack, Senator Smathers acted as Democratic floor leader. However, he declined to be considered for the official post of whip. He was a close personal friend of both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, from their days in Congress to their presidencies, and retained a close friendship with a Republican member of the Class of ‘46, Richard M. Nixon.

Senator Smathers chaired the Senate Democratic Campaign Committee in 1956, served on the Democratic Policy Committee, and was elected Secretary to the Democratic Conference. He served on the Commerce, Finance, and Foreign Relations Committees, among others. Throughout his years in the Senate he made Latin American affairs such a special concern that he was once recognized on the floor as “the Senator from Latin America.”

Senator Smathers’ years of service spanned the era from the Solid South to the two-party South. When he began his Senate career, southern Democrats dominated the institution through their chairmanships of the major committees. Symbolic of the political changes of the times, he was succeeded in the Senate by the first Republican senator from Florida since Reconstruction. Over the years he witnessed the evolution of both the South and the Senate on civil rights legislation. In 1963, Senator Smathers became one of the first southern senators to vote for cloture, on a communications satellite bill. Together with Spessard Holland he sponsored the Twenty-Fourth amendment to the Constitution, outlawing poll taxes.

Following his retirement from the Senate, George Smathers returned to the practice of law in Miami and Washington, and became a prominent Washington lobbyist. In these interviews he offered his opinions of the Senate from both inside and outside the institution, its committee activities, its dealings with the press, and its leading figures.

Senator Smathers deposited his papers at the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He also gave oral history interviews to the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson presidential libraries.

Senator George Smathers died on January 20, 2007.