

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Congressional Crackup

“Crackup of the Committees” by Richard E. Cohen, in *National Journal* (July 31, 1999), 1501 M St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

“Congress in its committee rooms is Congress at work. Whatever is to be done must be done by, or through, the committee.” So stated budding political scientist and future president Woodrow Wilson in his classic 1885 study, *Congressional Government*. For most of the 20th century this remained true, writes Cohen, a *National Journal* staff correspondent, but after three decades of decay, committee power “has largely collapsed.”

When Wilson’s rule was in force, Cohen notes, members working in committees “won deference” for the expertise they developed on particular policy matters, and committee chairmen generally “were recognized as first among equals. Their legislation was carefully crafted after extensive debate and deal-making, and was rarely challenged on the House or Senate floor.”

This system began to break down under the Democrats, he says. Committee chairmen, who were mostly southern and conservative, resisted large parts of Democratic president John F. Kennedy’s legislative agenda in the early 1960s. They went along with most of President Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” initiatives after his landslide election victory in 1964, but once his popularity waned, the southerners and northern machine Democrats regained the upper hand and “engaged in a titanic struggle with liberal Democratic reformers who demanded a more activist federal government.”

The reformers finally won, thanks to Watergate, which prompted voters in 1974 to elect an unusually liberal “class” of representatives. Out went “iron-clad seniority rules, closed-door deal-making, and Southern dominance among congressional Democrats.”

Junior House members won seats on the most powerful panels, and subcommittee chairmen gained vast new influence. The introduction of C-SPAN cable TV coverage in the House in 1978 encouraged members to be even more independent.

The committee system subsequently became ever more ineffectual, Cohen says. During the Reagan years, with Democrats still in control of the House, important legislation such as the Social Security reform of 1983 “was written largely in informal settings outside of the committee process.” Presented with the Clinton administration’s “costly, indigestible” health care plan in 1994, neither House nor Senate committees were able to come up with credible legislation.

The next year, with Republicans now in control of Congress and committed to their “Contract with America,” a “death warrant” was issued for the old committee system, Cohen says. House Speaker Newt Gingrich “circumvented and intentionally undermined the committee process by creating Republican task forces and demanding that they write legislation reflecting his own views.” The Republicans also imposed a six-year term limit on committee chairmen in both houses, and cut committee staff positions.

Today, on issues ranging from gun control to patients’ rights, Congress confronts “party-driven legislation that was hastily brought to the House or Senate floor without a thorough vetting—or any attempts at bipartisan compromise—among the experts at the committee level.” The committee system’s breakdown, Cohen says, is “a major factor in the chaos that pervades Capitol Hill.”

Dodging the ‘Magic Bullet’

“Richard Russell and Earl Warren’s Commission: The Politics of an Extraordinary Investigation” by Max Holland, in *Miller Center Report* (Spring 1999), P.O. Box 5106, Charlottesville, Va. 22905.

When the Warren Commission issued its report 35 years ago, it shortsightedly fudged a bit on its conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald,

acting alone, had assassinated President John F. Kennedy. The note of ambivalence, which has fed the popular belief in a conspiracy, was con-