

Preface

Observers of Congress are generally aware that the Senate president pro tempore is one of our national legislature's three constitutionally mandated officers. Few, however, are acquainted with the diversity of background and accomplishment of the 87 senators who have held that post during its 219-year span.

Since 1949, the Senate has awarded this high honor to its majority party's most senior member. Earlier times, however, occasionally witnessed spirited election contests for the office. Perhaps the most dramatic occurred in 1911. In that year, selection of a replacement for William Frye of Maine—who had served in that position for 15 of his 30 years in the Senate—caused a rancorous three-month disruption of Senate proceedings. Republican Jacob Gallinger of New Hampshire, candidate of the majority party, trailed Democrat Augustus Bacon of Georgia, with other senators receiving scattered votes. Under a long-standing practice that reflects the position's great stature, the president pro tempore must win a majority of all votes cast, rather than a mere plurality of those received by multiple candidates. In 1911, no candidate secured that majority. Additional rounds of voting over the ensuing weeks failed to produce a winner. Finally, on August 12, as pressure mounted for a decision on statehood for Arizona and New Mexico, and as senators agitated to escape Washington's wilting summer heat, party leaders brokered an unprecedented compromise. For the remainder of that Congress, Democrat Bacon would alternate as president pro tempore with Gallinger and three other Republicans. The intense emotions fired by this deadlock prompted the Senate to

publish extracts of its proceedings for all president pro tempore elections between 1789 and 1911. The resulting densely packed 250-page document, until now, has stood as the only Senate-produced account of the office's development.

A brief review of this new volume's pages will make clear that the Senate, from its earliest days, elected its most exemplary members to this office—individuals who brought to their rulings an extra measure of gravity and respect. What was said of President pro tempore James Hillhouse in 1801 could be applied to many of his successors. “He had that sort of natural leadership among his equals; that special faculty of influence over men, that power of winning their full confidence and of making them willing to follow where he led.”

I am most grateful to Secretary of the Senate Nancy Erickson and to the historians who work under her jurisdiction within the Senate Historical Office for preparing this engaging volume.

I also wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge the indispensable support of my own talented and loyal staff, including Barbara Videnieks, Betsy Dietz, and Martha Anne McIntosh.

Above all, I recognize the memory of my partner in nearly 69 years of life and love: my late wife, the coal miner's daughter—Erma Ora James.

Robert C. Byrd
President Pro Tempore
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