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Guest (s): Senator John C. Stennis (D-MS)

Title: Civil Rights Bills

Note: Questions were paraphrased and/or shortened by the transcriber. For the exact question, please consult the audiotapes.

Stennis: Well, thank you, Dick. I'm always glad of a chance to be on radio and television which is a medium of communication which is having such a fine, direct influence on the people in connection with our home affairs and problems as well as in connection with world problems. And I think it will be a great day for world peace when these medium, radio and television, are used more and more around the world.

Morphew: Let's begin by talking about some of these civil rights bills...wouldn't one of these bills provide for a federal voting registrar throughout the nation?

Stennis: Yes, that's correct, Dick, but before discussing any one phase of pending legislation, let me point out the bigness of the government that we have today. It's a day of big business and big labor management problems and the problems of big government and we have the great world question of big peace, too, in a big world where the consequences of peace or war are greater than ever before. I mention these as a background for the idea that it's high time that our federal government get more into these big problems and get more out of the local affairs and the local problems of our country. Instead, though, bills like the civil rights bills try to put our government more and more into local affairs. Now, one of these civil rights bills even creates a crime in connection, a new crime, in connection with the operation of our schools, for instance. In other words, we are going to have the attorney general of the United States, a nationwide district attorney, prosecuting people about the operation of the school. Now, we have another bill pending here at the same time that proposes to give money, federal money, for the construction of school buildings and written into its face is the provision that there'll be no local, there'll be no federal control but all control of this money will be local. It points out the inconsistency of our approach to these problems and I think brands unmistakably the so-called civil right bill and the one creating a crime for the operation of a school as largely political. The two couldn't be consistent. Of course, that's just one of the matters that those bills go into. You mentioned the one about the federal registrars. Now, skipping over then the idea of another bill that makes the voting records public, I have no objection particularly to that bill, they are public in my state, but I think every

state certainly passes on those matters. And another one there in this civil rights bills trying to control primary elections, men espousing laws here, federal laws, to control primary elections when they don't even have primary elections in their state. Their state legislature has never seen fit to create that method of electing officers. Still, men who are elected without primary elections in conventions in their states come here to Washington and they want to sponsor and pass a law that would give federal control over primary elections everywhere. I think that's another illustration of the absurdity in the political aspect.

Morphew: Do you feel that this bill providing for federal registrars is of doubtful legal validity?

Stennis: Well, I certainly think there's no doubt in the world about a provision of that kind being clearly unconstitutional. The constitution of the United States clearly and expressly puts election matters and the qualification of voters and the conduction of election in the hands of the respective states. Now just a few days ago the president of the United States, President Eisenhower, in a public statement to the press said that this federal registrar bill that you refer to was of doubtful constitutionality. Now that's his idea at this time. Doubtless, he will be fully advised if this thing gets more serious and I'm sure that he won't sign the bill because now he has serious doubt of its constitutionality and I believe his study will convince him beyond that doubt. So it's another illustration of getting out into these extraneous fields.

Morphew: Why do you think there is so much agitation in Washington for the passage of these bills?

Stennis: Well, this whole field of bills and this related subject matter, I think, is largely conceived as a political matter and perhaps in past years it has paid off some in various areas of the country but I believe the people are fed up with it, they're sick and tired of it, they see the far-reaching implications that are really involved, and I think the tune has been over-played and the people understand it better and do not want us to plunge into these new fields of local operation with reference to elections, schools and a great number of other things that puts federal control at their very doorsteps, and they realize as I said while ago, many big problems are becoming greater that the federal government must cope with and instead of that, we are inclined, some are, to want to take on these local matters. I think your question can be answered another way, too, Dick. I can't see how that anyone could conclude that all the judgment and the brains of this nation are located here in Washington. I don't see how anyone could think that all the brains of the country is in Congress. Why, these state legislatures, the governors of the various states and other responsible officials at the local community level, the district level, and the thousands and thousands of very intelligent, civic-minded voters at all areas of the country and every community, they are the ones that knows (sic) the problems better as they exist in those communities and they are the ones that most probably can find a solution to them.

Morphew: We might also point out that some of these proposals would affect all regions of the country, not just one region, wouldn't they?

Stennis: Oh, of course. A great deal of them are directly primarily at the South, but they will of course apply everywhere, and once these laws are passed, they seldom ever appear but more and more power is sought, and the first thing the people know, they're in the clutches, of the operations of these laws, federal laws, I mean, which are largely beyond their control and in that way we are becoming enmeshed more and more and needlessly so in a host of regulations concerning housing, concerning schools, concerning voting, concerning voting, concerning farming, I think we've overdone the thing in agriculture, concerning many, many other ways of making a living, concerning medicine and health, and concerning higher education, scholarships, and a great number of matters that have to be worked out by the people themselves.

Morphew: Are there any vital matters being neglected as a result of this focus on these issues?

Stennis: Well, I'm certainly glad you brought that up, certainly. While we are having to take up so much time with the subjects we've discussed here, these so-called civil rights bills, standing by here awaiting a solution is this, crying for some kind of new legislation, is our vast, nationwide farm problem. And, not exactly unattended, but unsolved, is another far-reaching problem of inflation that's gradually undermining the basic structure of our present form of economy, gradually destroying the value of all pensions, little accumulations that the people have saved up, life insurance, and heading us in the direction that countries have gone that had their economy destroyed. Also, crying for future solutions is this problem of strikes, labor and management. We have no strike right now but there are some more, doubtless, around the corner. Or this great missile program that requires the utmost attention. I notice the president has come out for a stronger program, the last few days. I know there's a lot of pains connected with those who have to make the decisions. The overall world conferences that are looming up before us here in which the president is going to attend, and the nation needs serious thought, of course, striking for the hope of world peace. Unless there's some kind of a solution here offered in the next few years for machinery that can better ensure peace, we could fall into the most devastating war that the world has ever known where no one can win but all will lose. So, I'm glad to emphasize through you to the American people that these grave problems are the ones that press for solution. Still, we are forced to put them aside here and take up time and weeks and weeks of discussion and it's largely just a political maneuver after all.

Morphew: And you think we ought to get back to the important things.

Stennis: Why, of course, the necessary and the vital things crying for this attention.