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Congressional Record S. 5344-5 - Sarah McClendon Tribute to

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Mansfield, Mike 1903-2001, "Congressional Record S. 5344-5 - Sarah McClendon Tribute to" (1974). *Mike Mansfield Speeches, Statements and Interviews*. 1174.

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payments of checks to boys going to school under the GI Bill . . ."

The question, if that's what it was, fell in rather curiously with the more cosmic ones being asked that evening about impeachment and the energy crisis, but Nixon undertook to answer it anyway. He was going on about how "expeditiously" such payments were being attended to by Donald E. Johnson, Administrator of Veterans Affairs, when Sarah McClendon belittled:

"He is the very man I'm talking about. He's not giving you the correct information . . . He has no real system for getting at the statistics on this problem."

"Well," said the President, "if he isn't listening to this program, I'll report to him just what you've said." And then, with a light smile: "He may have heard even though he wasn't listening to the program."

The incident provoked Eric Sevareid, a little later that night, to refer on CBS-TV to Mrs. McClendon as "this lady who has been known to give rudeness a bad name," and two days later The New York Times devoted an entire editorial to the "boorish behavior" of the lady. Elsewhere in the same paper, however; there appeared the news that on the afternoon following the press conference, Don Johnson of the VA had conceded "we simply don't have" the information Mrs. McClendon was calling for.

Then, last Sunday, in his radio address on veterans' affairs, the President went out of his way to say the following: "Some of you may recall that in a recent White House press conference, one of the most spirited reporters in Washington, Sarah McClendon of Texas, asked me why some veterans studying under the GI Bill were not receiving their government checks or were receiving them long after they were due. That was a good question . . . And due in large part to Mrs. McClendon and others who have brought problems to our attention, the Veterans Administration is now engaged in a major effort to improve their operations."

Sarah McClendon entered those words in her file labeled "Mission Accomplished." And next to them she tucked the clipping of a letter to the editor of The New York Times. It said Mrs. McClendon deserved "appreciation, not condemnation, for the questions she has asked Presidents over the years," and concluded: "Mrs. McClendon is reviled, I fear, largely because so many people find tough-mindedness in a woman an unattractive trait. A man who had asked the same questions as Mrs. McClendon would not be criticized by the Times." The writer: Eileen Shanahan, Washington correspondent of the Times.

"Brave of her," said Sara McClendon in the middle of a harrowing day in Washington—the day after the announcement of Nixon's tax delinquency. "I went to 3:30 this morning," she said, meaning worked till then, and had just now come away from a turbulent midday White House briefing—"They're all riled up"—followed by broadcasts to two of her outlets. Over the years she has represented a varying string of newspapers and radio and TV stations, mostly in Texas and New England, which once inspired Eisenhower to ask her before all her colleagues: "Do you get fired every week and join another paper the next week?"

Mrs. McClendon threw back her coat to reveal several ropes of pearls and beads and stuff, as well as her eyeglasses dangling from a chain upon the front of her green dress. She is a short, ample woman with blue eyes and vaguely reddish hair; in the early years she was invariably described as "petite."

She ticked off her 10 present outlets, leading with three Texas papers: the El Paso Times, the Sherman Democrat, the Temple Telegram. "I've had those three clients since 1946. That's pretty good, isn't it? I always say I don't have enough. I need more. I'm very small potatoes. A lot of people wouldn't

take these little piddling jobs, but I put them all together and made a living of it for myself and my daughter. And it kept me independent."

Incidentally, she's no longer affiliated with the Manchester (N. H.) Union-Leader, the arch-conservative William Loeb paper that printed the phony Muskie "Canuck" letter. "Loeb never did tell me how to write, and never asked me to do any of his dirty work, but I'm glad I don't work for him now."

Sarah McClendon is out of Tyler, an East Texas town between Dallas and Shreveport. "I'm the youngest of nine, and there are eight of us living and I'm 63, be 64 in July, and that's pretty good. All cussed, rugged people who all help each other."

Sidney Smith McClendon, her father, of "good, solid, honest, staunch Scotch stock," was a piano merchant and owner of a stationery store, Annie Rebecca Bonner McClendon, her mother, a Southerner with English blood, took Sarah at the age of 6 to suffragette speeches and rallies.

"Wonderful people. My father would walk home a couple of miles with toys on Christmas eve, to keep the kids from knowing. He pushed me, gave me drive, telling me it was contacts that count, that I should go on, should get out and meet people."

"When he was 11 he marched in a parade with signs saying: 'Democrats, Ain't You Happy?'—because Reconstruction had just been voted out. My family nearly starved to death during Reconstruction. My people were born right after the Civil War. I've known several slaves who were owned by my family. And," said Mrs. McClendon reflectively, "I'm very conscience-stricken that we owned them."

The wolf was never far from the door during her own girlhood. "It's very hard being poor. Not that I'm not still. But people then, in that part of Texas, were very poor. There was no oil money, and there was this craving for industry and for agricultural revolution. Then, when I was "grown-up" and a reporter, there came an oil boom, with all its greed and cruelty and arrogance. It's fascinating to cover an oil boom. It helped me with this recent energy crisis."

It was with the assistance of her brothers and sisters that Sarah "managed to get through two years of Tyler Junior College." Then she went to work in a bank "and borrowed the money to go to the University of Missouri School of Journalism," from which she was graduated in 1931.

"I started to go to Chicago, but I was too timid and too frightened to do that. So I called Carl Estes, publisher of the Tyler Courier-Times, and he said: 'Come on down tomorrow.' I went to work for him at \$10 a week—crusading to get a new hospital. I think you should crusade, don't you? And Estes, who's dead now, was a crusading editor." But when, in 1939, she "made a speech about fascist chambers of commerce," the paper was forced to fire her.

For the next several years she developed a stringer service for other Texas newspapers. When World War II arrived she promptly joined the Women's Army Corps as a buck private, feeling she owned it to the two brothers she'd seen go off to World War I. "I must have been 7 or 8 then, and I saw how it broke the family. A small child in a big family—I guess I observed more than they realized. You can't imagine what 'going overseas' meant to an inland family. Just terrifying."

The WAC put her in public relations—she'd wanted intelligence—and sent her to Washington in 1943. That year she married salesman John Thomas O'Brien, who is now also among the dead.

"He left me before my child was born. I got out of the Army in 1944, and nine days after she was born I got a job in the National Press Building, working for Bascom M. Timmons who has a number of papers,

TRIBUTE TO SARAH MCCLENDON

Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that an article which was published in the New York Post on Saturday, April 6, 1974, entitled "Keeping After Those Presidents," written by Jerry Tallmer, be printed in the Record at the conclusion of my remarks.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered. (See exhibit 1.)

Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, this article has to do with Sarah McClendon who, I think, has been a determined reporter, who has asked very tough questions, and who has not been given the recognition which I think is her due.

Therefore, I am delighted at this time to have this article printed in the Record. I am only sorry that I do not have the letter which Eileen Shanahan wrote to her newspaper, the New York Times, in defense of Mrs. McClendon.

The article follows:

EXHIBIT 1

KEEPING AFTER THOSE PRESIDENTS

(By Jerry Tallmer)

WASHINGTON.—President Eisenhower used to turn purple with rage at her questions, not least on the subject of his dedication to golf. President Kennedy, on the other hand, used to turn to ice. At one of his press conferences, rather than recognize her repeated demands for the floor, he pointed through her, beyond her, above her, right of her, left of her, to other correspondents.

President Nixon has had his problems, too, with leather-lunged Sarah McClendon of Texas. But many thought he gave as good as he got, and perhaps a little bit more, at a televised press conference six weeks ago. "You have the loudest voice," he said, recognizing Mrs. McClendon amid a clamor of cries of "Mr. President!"

"Good," said Mrs. McClendon forthrightly. "Thank you, sir." Seizing the reins, she cantered on. "I don't think you're fully informed about some of the things that are happening in the government in a domestic way. I'm sure it's not your fault, but maybe the people you appointed to office aren't giving you right information. For example, I just discovered that the Veteran's Administration has absolutely no means of telling precisely what is the national problem regarding the

Such a kind man—he would have died if he'd known I had a nine-day baby back home. I remember having to have someone open those heavy doors. His assistant, his underling, said to me: 'You won't be here long.' Sarah McClendon let it lie there, and then said: 'I was just blessed. Wasn't I blessed?'

Though nominally Mrs. O'Brien, Sarah McClendon prefers to be called Mrs. McClendon. "Emily Post would say you have to say 'Miss,' but who the hell cares about Emily Post?" Her daughter Sally is today Mrs. David McDonald, wife of a Canadian correspondent based in London and mother of Allison McClendon Jones, product of an earlier marriage.

"Sally was my copy girl and cub reporter at Capitol Hill, a brilliant girl. She had so much of it, she said: 'Mother, I'm retiring from politics at 22.' And my granddaughter, she'll be 5 next week and she's a chip off the old block. She'll be better, stronger. My daughter's much better, stronger than me, and Allison will be better than that. They do get better, you know."

It was time to talk about some Presidents.

"I started with Roosevelt, of course. I could see he was a very sick man, his fingers fumbling behind his desk.

"Then Truman. I don't recall too much of his press conferences.

"Eisenhower. You had to educate Eisenhower when you were asking your question. Well, you have to with all Presidents, this country's so big and there's so much to know, but you had to do this with Ike."

Kennedy. "I had a feeling that he was starting a lot of things and not finishing others, and this worried me. But you couldn't help but like him."

Lyndon Johnson. "Oh gosh." Mrs. McClendon's hand flew to her throat. "We had a very long relationship, and for a while were like brother and sister. But the first time I met him—he was a Congressman—he shook his finger in my face and started screaming to me about a story I'd done on oil. He wanted me to take it back—and I wouldn't.

"The thing about Lyndon Johnson is that if you displeased him, there could be repercussions. I've seen it on me and on others." Such as? "Well, he could make you lose papers, for one thing."

It was not Mrs. McClendon's shining hour when, back in the Kennedy era, she hurled accusations of "security risks" at a couple of State Dept. officials against whom there was no such case. However, she has pretty much stopped doing things like that.

What never stops is the pounding of her questions. (She seized or was granted the floor 49 times during the 55 press conferences of Eisenhower's first two years.) Nor does she think her questions are trivial.

"When I asked Eisenhower if he'd gotten permission from Congress before sending the Marines to Lebanon, TRB wrote in The New Republic: 'Sarah McClendon may have changed history with her question—one which Eileen Shanahan in her letter to the Times said 'does not look silly or frivolous now.'"

It was 11 years ago that Mrs. McClendon organized a Press Briefing Group with the object of getting more women to ask questions. "We have men in it now, too. For the longest time there were only about three to five women who asked questions. There are more now who at least try to get their questions in."

And it was 30 years ago she first sought entry into the National Press Club. For 27 years that privilege was denied her. When they finally took her in, gave her a badge, a meal, Sarah McClendon . . . wept.