

West Wing: The Stackhouse Filibuster



BY STEPHEN LEE /November 1, 2005

It's Friday night in the West Wing of the White House under President Josiah Bartlett, the President's executive staff are expecting Congress to pass the Family Wellness Act—a \$6 billion categorical grant which provides subsidized medical care for childhood diseases. The children's health care bill was passed in the House of Representatives, and is expected to be easily passed in the US Senate that evening. However, as the staff is preparing to leave for the weekend, Senator Howard Stackhouse from Minnesota begins an unexpected **filibuster** of the bill.

The Senate filibuster stems from two sources: first, the Senate has no restrictions on floor debate and second, there are a limited number of days in a legislative session. Taking advantage of this, a single senator can delay all Senate business by refusing to let a piece of legislation go to a vote. When this happens, the senators supporting the delayed piece of legislation must decide if it is worth it to wait until the filibustering senator gives up. Thus, filibustering senators can force the withdrawal of legislation they do not support even if they are in the minority.

Press Secretary CJ Cregg emails her father to explain what is going on:

"The rules of a filibuster are simple enough. You keep the floor as long as you hold the floor. What does that mean? It means you can't stop talking ever. You can't eat and you can't drink which is fine because you can't leave the chamber to use the bathroom either. But all that's nothing compared with this: You aren't allowed to sit down. You aren't allowed to lean on anything or for that matter anyone. If you ever have a free two hours and are so inclined, try standing up without leaning on anything and talking the whole time. You won't make it. I wouldn't make it. Stackhouse wasn't expected to last 15 minutes. He's 78 years old, he has a cold. . . . and he just went into hour number eight."

Perhaps the most significant use of the filibuster in the 20th century was opposing civil rights legislation. Senator Strom Thurmond holds the record for the longest filibuster, speaking for 24 hours and 18 minutes to block the 1957 Civil Rights Act.

The only way to stop a filibuster is through Senate Rule XXII, which allows the Senate to invoke **cloture** and cut off the speaker. However, cloture requires a supermajority to pass: 2/3rds—or 60--of the senators must vote to stop the filibuster.

Supporters of the filibuster argue that the tactic helps block the 'tyranny of the majority' by forcing senators to reconsider extreme legislation. Opponents say that it allows a small group of senators to override popular will and that it was never intended by the Founding Fathers.

Cast & Credits

President Bartlett: Martin Sheen

VP John Hoynes: Tim Matheson

CJ Cregg: Allison Janey

Running Time: 42 Minutes.

ASSIGNMENT

Look for the following vocabulary words and how they are used during the episode:

FILIBUSTER

EARMARK

CHRISTMAS TREE BILL

VETO

WHITE HOUSE STAFF

BULLY PULPIT

For fun, take the trivia quiz on the episode here: <http://www.funtrivia.com/trivia-quiz/Television/The-Stackhouse-Filibuster-172267.html>

Name _____ Period _____

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1. What is a filibuster?

2. What is the purpose of a filibuster?

3. According to the President's Press Secretary, CJ Craig, what are the rules to filibustering? Name at least 5.

4. What was the bill which caused Senator Stackhouse's filibuster? What was this bill supposed to do?

6. What did Stackhouse want to attach to the Act? Why didn't Josh Lyman agree to Stackhouse's request?

7. What is a Christmas Tree Bill? *Hint: think about what happens on a Christmas tree.*

8. What is the real motivation behind Stackhouse's filibuster?

9. What did Josh Lyman's secretary, Donna, suggest to help Stackhouse continue to bring attention to his issue?

10. How did the President help to end the filibuster?
