

Watergate

Upheaval of the Seniority System

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Discussion of the Watergate Babies and committee assignments.

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And so the Democratic Caucus that was controlled by this new class of Watergate Babies, as they were called, decided that they would abolish the seniority system, or at least make severe changes in it, and started interviewing the senior Members, who either were sitting chairmen or aspired to be, to see whether or not the caucus would endorse their chairmanships. And, of course, four senior committee chairmen were removed. One eventually got his chair back—Wayne Hays of Ohio—but that was kind of a fluky thing. But Wright Patman, Bob Poage, F. Edward Hébert, three very senior, very powerful Members of the House lost their committee chairs. It was unheard of. Granted, some of the older chairmen had become rather arrogant and insular and were not responsive to the views and the changing feelings of their younger colleagues. But it really upset the leadership applecart. And it was a while before we kind of returned to a modified seniority system. It made things rather uncertain for a while. It also turned the selection of the second tier of leadership in the House into a conflict of personalities, and also something of a popularity contest, which was quite at variance from what had happened in the past.