

# Senate Statistics

## Secretaries of the Senate

### Edwin A. Halsey (1933-1845)

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*Behind the fanfare, oratory, and glamour of senatorial prestige, a clock works to keep the Senators running. The man who winds the clock is Colonel Halsey.*

No Senate official could hope for better media attention than Secretary Edwin Halsey received in a 1937 *Washington Evening Star* profile. The reporter described Halsey as "peculiarly fitted by nature and temperament" to fulfill the many duties of his office. "Possessed of a warm, friendly understanding of human nature, and qualified by his special experience [of having worked for the Senate for the past forty years] for the exigencies of his office, he is one of the best-loved figures on the Hill today. The United States Senate can no more contemplate a session without the friendly guidance of [Halsey] than it can contemplate a Washington without a Senate."

Edwin A. Halsey was born on September 4, 1881, near Lynchburg, Virginia, the son of a lawyer who had served as a captain in the Confederate army. He attended local public schools, a private academy, and, for a time, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. The sixteen-year-old Halsey's political education began in earnest on December 6, 1897, when, thanks to his uncle, Senator [John W. Daniel](#) (D-VA), he signed on for service as a page in the press gallery of the United States Senate. He worked in the press gallery for the next sixteen years, moving from page to assistant superintendent. Throughout this period, Halsey maintained his home-state political connections and won honorary appointments as "colonel" on the staffs of two Virginia governors. For the rest of his life, his friends knew him as "Colonel Halsey."

In 1913, when the Democrats took control of the Senate, Halsey moved from the gallery to the floor, under the jurisdiction of the sergeant at arms, to supervise the Democratic pages and assist Democratic members. Halsey's fitness for higher office within the Senate soon became apparent. Beginning in 1923, and again in 1927 and 1931, the Democratic Caucus expressed its confidence by nominating him as its candidate for Secretary of the Senate. In each of these years, however this proved a purely symbolic gesture, as the Republicans, in the majority, had sufficient votes to elect their own candidates.

By 1929, Halsey and his Republican counterpart, [Carl Loeffler](#), had long since proven their effectiveness as floor assistants. As a consequence, their respective parties created the post of party secretary and made Halsey and Loeffler the first to hold that title. (Loeffler served as Republican party secretary until 1947, when he was elected Secretary of the Senate.) Years later, Senate Democratic Majority Leader [Alben Barkley](#) (D-KY) explained that Halsey (the same could be said of Loeffler) "advanced from page, step by step, because of his efficiency, his loyalty, the outstanding charm of his personality, and the recognition, regardless of party, of his qualifications and his qualities as a public servant."

From the late 1920s through 1944, Halsey also served as secretary-treasurer of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. He kept careful files of the political situation in every state, including candidate biographies, their victory prospects, information on funding sources, and a list of speakers. (In the late 1970s, staff of the Senate Historical Office discovered three dust-shrouded boxes of these files in a Capitol basement storeroom and transferred them to Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.)

Halsey attended the ten Democratic national conventions from 1904 to 1940, serving initially as a press aide and, from 1928, convention sergeant at arms. In 1931, he entered a contest along with 100,000 others to create a slogan for the coming presidential election. He won a twenty-five dollar second prize for "Vote Democrat and eat regularly." For the 1936 presidential campaign, he designed a "lucky campaign coin" for sale by the Young Democrats Clubs. On one side the coin bore the likenesses of President Franklin Roosevelt and Vice President [John Nance Garner](#), that year's party nominees, with the notation "Heads I Win." The reverse depicted the tail of a departing elephant and the inscription "Tails You Lose."

Halsey's election as Secretary on March 9, 1933, coincided with the start of the New Deal's so-called Hundred Days, a frantic burst of legislative activity that lasted until mid-June. On his first day in office, the House of Representatives passed the Emergency Banking Act after only thirty-eight minutes of debate and without having seen the text of the bill. The Senate approved the act hours later and President Roosevelt signed it that evening. Other legislation designed to combat the Great Depression followed quickly and placed unprecedented demands on members and Senate floor staff. With more than a third of a century of Senate floor experience, Halsey helped absorb the shock of these demands.

In those turbulent times, a tidal wave of new members flooded into the Senate, severely straining established practices. In the six years between 1931 and 1937, Senate presiding officers administered oaths to seventy-nine new members (twenty-three more than in the previous six-year period). The increased volume of new members and major legislation made the need for floor staff expertise more apparent than ever. This pressure fell with particular force on Senate Minute and Journal Clerk Charles Watkins, a thirty-year veteran who had served as de facto parliamentarian for the past decade. Recognizing the increased demands on Watkins, the Senate in 1935 changed his job title to "journal clerk

and parliamentarian," and two years later divided those positions, assigning Watkins sole duties as parliamentarian.

As secretary, Halsey deepened his knowledge of the Senate's history and inaugurated several history-based reference books, which have continued in updated editions. They include *Enactment of a Law* (1934), *Presidential Vetoes* (1935), *Factual Campaign Information* (1939, more recently titled *Senate Election Law Guidebook*), *Senate Election Cases from 1913 to 1940* (1940), and *Proposed Amendments to the Constitution of the United States* (1935-1941). Keenly interested in preserving the Senate's historical records, he arranged in 1937 to transfer 4,000 linear feet of records, dating from 1789, to the newly opened National Archives.

From his various perches around the Senate chamber, Halsey witnessed many chapters of American history in the making. In 1898, from the press gallery, he observed as senators cheered the news of Admiral Dewey's victory over the Spanish at Manila Bay. In 1917, he watched as President Woodrow Wilson called for a declaration of war against Germany, and he subsequently stood on the floor as the Senate adopted the war resolution. Twenty-four years later, in December 1941, he attended the joint session in the House chamber at which President Franklin Roosevelt requested of Congress yet another war declaration.

Responsibilities for planning presidential inaugurations particularly engaged this secretary, who published a historical account of these ceremonies in the 1941 *American Bar Association Journal*. Early in 1945, Edwin Halsey actively resumed these familiar tasks in preparation for President Roosevelt's fourth inaugural, despite warnings from his doctors about a serious heart disorder. His previous experience with inaugurations held at the Capitol proved of little value, however, as this event was to be conducted, for the first time in history, at the White House. At the January 20, 1945, ceremony, senators observed Halsey in his usual cheerful and accommodating demeanor.

Nine days later, at the age of sixty-three, he was dead. A shocked Senate convened within hours of his death to express its sorrow at the loss of one who seemed so vitally engaged just days earlier. All sensed the ending of a major Senate career. No secretary, to that time, had come close to Halsey's longevity. Today, among secretaries, his total Senate service record is exceeded only by Carl Loeffler's fifty-nine years (1889-1949) and [Mark Trice](#)'s fifty-seven years (1916-1973). At the close of the Senate's business on January 29, 1945, this tribute from an Alabama resident was placed in the Congressional Record.

*Edwin A. Halsey*

E-very Member of the Senate

D-own to the smallest page

W-onders why dear Colonel Halsey

I-n the flower of his age

N-ow, at such a time, should die,

A-nd bid them the last goodbye.

H-e, a friend to everybody,  
A-lways ready to help, stood  
L-ooking for a chance to render  
S-ome assistance, when he could.  
E-ven down to the end;  
Y-ea, he proved a ready friend.

Horace C. Carlisle, 1945