

# Senate Statistics

## Sergeants at Arms

### Joseph C. Duke (1955-1965)

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"He operates from the shadows." In 1961, one writer noted that although Senate Sergeant at Arms Joe Duke "escorts presidents, walks with kings, and keeps current with clerks, he is generally inconspicuous." While other congressional officials contributed detailed biographical statements to the Congressional Directory, Duke's ran to only four lines. It mentioned only the dates in 1949 and 1953 that the Senate elected him Sergeant at Arms, the year of his marriage, the name of his wife, and his wife's place of birth. When he retired from the Senate in 1965, after thirty-four years of service, he quickly disappeared from view. Word has it that he died several years ago, but there is no accessible record to document that event.

Joseph C. Duke was born in Bisbee, Arizona, in 1908. He attended the public schools in Phoenix and went on to study at the University of Arizona. He eventually left that university in the midst of the Great Depression and went to work as a bank teller and then as a supply clerk in a copper-mining company. In 1930, while working as a supply clerk, Duke joined the Miami, Arizona, volunteer fire department. Living rent-free in a room above the firehouse helped him cut his expenses in those financially difficult times. Duke spent many of his spare hours visiting at a nearby police station. When a policeman was killed in the line of duty, Duke moved into his job.

On July 5, 1930, the rookie lawman, against the advice of his captain, arrived alone at a murder scene. As he stepped from his car, a bullet slammed into his stomach, exiting just inches from his spine. Blinded with pain and lying on his back, Officer Duke drew his revolver and fired. He then pulled himself into his car and made it back to town for the medical assistance that saved his life. Later he learned that his bullets, instead of striking their intended target, sprayed the dirt at his feet. He had come dangerously close to blowing off his toes. His assailant escaped.

Following a six-month hospital stay, Duke decided to seek a more peaceful job. He wrote to Arizona Senator [Henry Ashurst](#), a Democrat, inquiring about job possibilities on Capitol Hill. Ashurst, the Senate's fifth most senior member, found Duke a place on his

staff as an "assistant secretary." The tall and charming Ashurst, a natural actor, loved the theater and Hollywood. One of Joe Duke's first staff duties in 1932 was to drive the senator around Hollywood's movie lots during his frequent visits there. (Years later, in 1961, when Duke was Sergeant at Arms, he helped his former boss obtain a film role as an old senator who kept falling asleep at his desk in Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent*, the story of a contentious Senate confirmation fight.)

After Ashurst's 1940 reelection defeat, Duke joined the staff of his state's other senator, [Carl Hayden](#). Within a short time, he transferred to the Secretary of the Senate's office, where he served as a bill clerk, and from 1943, as principal clerk. His effectiveness in that job convinced the Republicans to retain him when they gained control of the Senate in 1947.

In 1949, when the majority shifted back to the Democrats, Duke actively lobbied for the Sergeant at Arms' job. Idaho's Democratic Senator [Glen Taylor](#) described how Duke conducted that campaign. Instead of approaching senators to seek their support, he lobbied their secretaries. "He told them how happy he had been to work with them and do the little favors he had been performing throughout the years. After a friendly visit," Taylor continued, "and as he prepared to leave each office, he reminded staff members he would like to be Sergeant at Arms and would appreciate it if they would put a good word in with the senator." His tactic worked and—with help from Arizona Senators Hayden and [Ernest McFarland](#), the incoming majority leader—Duke won the Democratic Caucus nomination over two other strong competitors. On January 3, 1949, the full Senate ratified that choice.

Despite his desire to avoid public notice, Joe Duke attracted a great deal of it in 1951 when Senator [Estes Kefauver](#)'s crime investigating committee sought his help in rounding up several infamous Chicago gangsters. To obtain the services of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Duke swore in that agency's director, J. Edgar Hoover, as Deputy Sergeant at Arms. Hoover then deputized his agents to help round up seventeen crime figures who had refused to answer committee subpoenas. Some of the fugitive witnesses preferred to surrender directly to Duke rather than risking arrest by the F.B.I. Duke gladly accepted the required \$3,000 cash bond, often in \$1,000 notes peeled from large rolls of bills. His biggest prize was the notorious Jacob (Greasy Thumb) Guzik, who gained his own national fame with the agreement that only his hands would be shown during the committee's televised proceedings. For his surprising success, Duke earned the committee's gratitude—and a nickname. From that time, Senator [Hubert Humphrey](#) delighted in calling Duke "the Houdini of Washington."

Duke served as Sergeant at Arms until the Republicans reclaimed the Senate in 1953, when he was replaced by Forest A. Harness. With the return of a Democratic majority in January 1955, however, Duke regained his former post with its responsibility for fourteen departments and a staff of eight hundred. Senators of both parties widely respected the soft-spoken and immaculately dressed Sergeant at Arms for his nonpartisan and highly effective approach to his responsibilities.

By 1965, Duke decided to end his thirty-four-year Senate career, citing his and his wife's poor health as reasons for leaving. At the age of fifty-eight, he retired effective December 30, 1965 and returned to Arizona, where he lived for the next thirty years.