

Unfolding Provocation In the Strait of Hormuz: And Who, By the Way, Is John C. Stennis?!?

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In yet another threatening move, the U.S. recently sent an aircraft carrier through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow passageway of water that connects the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and then the Indian Ocean. The Strait of Hormuz borders Iran, as does the Persian Gulf. The Iranian military commander then “recommended” that the U.S. not return this aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf. The New York Times, on January 4, termed this the latest and “most aggressive” move in the increasingly intense maneuvering between the big gangsters the U.S. and Israel, on the one hand—which are menacing Iran with the threat of an attack and carrying out covert military activities against it even now—and Iran, the upstart mafioso which is attempting to project itself as an increasingly significant “player” in the domination and plunder of the region.

But that’s not the point of this article. No, this is about something that may seem, at first, a bit more minor—the name of the aircraft carrier that the U.S. sent through the Strait of Hormuz: the John C. Stennis.

Who, you might ask, is John C. Stennis? What are the boons and benefits for humanity accomplished by this John C. Stennis such that he came to have his name emblazoned on a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier?

Stennis was the U.S. senator from Mississippi from 1947 to 1988—41 years. During the majority of his tenure, Black people in Mississippi did not have the right to vote. Indeed, during his time in office, Black people in Mississippi were often lynched—including the notorious lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black youth visiting from Chicago who was taken out and murdered in 1955 for the crime of allegedly whistling at a white woman and whose killers sat laughing in the courtroom as they were acquitted and then sold their story to Look magazine. During John C. Stennis’ reign in the Senate, numerous people were murdered for the offense of attempting to register Black people to vote or otherwise fighting for basic rights—including Medgar Evers, who was assassinated for organizing a boycott of local stores in Jackson, Mississippi (an incident which is included in the popular book and movie *The Help*), as well as the civil rights organizers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, not to mention dozens of unsung and unmentioned Black activists working in local areas of Mississippi. During his long career of dignified deliberation, other African-American people were routinely imprisoned, put into mental hospitals, or severely beaten for similar acts of political resistance or often just for “acting uppity,” as the saying

went.

During the over 15,000 days that John C. Stennis held office in the U.S. Senate, Black people in Mississippi were first maintained in a state of semi-feudal, slavlike conditions as sharecroppers (and, again, often threatened or physically harmed if word got out that they even were thinking of moving away from the plantations on which they worked) and then, as cotton farming increasingly became mechanized and their labor was no longer profitable to the plantation owners, driven off the land and more often than not into even worse poverty than before. During most of the decade-after-decade tenure of John C. Stennis, all this was backed up by laws and customs that forced Black people to live as a class of people whose basic humanity was denied in every interaction with white people and who were constantly stigmatized, through legal and de facto segregation.

And during his time in office, as the U.S. became increasingly embarrassed on the international stage that such outrageous and totally brazen abuses of basic human rights flourished unpunished in this country and as African-American people and others, south and north, increasingly rose up against these abuses and shined an even brighter and more glaring light upon them, so that as a result of that the U.S. Congress was finally, 100 years after the Civil War, forced to pass civil rights legislation—even this could only happen over the bitter and stubborn obstruction of senators from the South who opposed even these basic rights.

Surely, given the fact that a naval aircraft carrier of “the greatest democracy the world has ever seen” now carries his name, John C. Stennis must have stood consistently and bravely against these horrible abuses. Or if not that, surely he must have now and then done some great courageous deed that showed him as a man of principle, a man of basic decency, a man who at least would speak out against things as barbaric as lynching, as assassination, and other terrible abuses carried out against an entire people. Or certainly, at least once he must have taken the Senate floor, cleared his throat and spoke, however haltingly, against one of the awful crimes that happened in his great state year in and year out of his 41 years in office.

Actually, no. John C. Stennis never said a word against any of the crimes touched on above, and indeed John C. Stennis stood FOR such crimes and the system that enabled and required those crimes. Stennis helped author the so-called “Southern Manifesto” of 1956 that upheld segregation of the schools and signaled approval from on high for the blood-soaked reaction that would follow. Stennis not only opposed every piece of civil rights legislation up until 1982, he spearheaded the hard core of that opposition. He even opposed funds that went toward Head Start programs for small children in Mississippi because it might aid Black people (and re-channeled those funds to segregated, all-white programs). He campaigned as, and truly was, an ardent upholder of segregation and all the horror that it entailed for decades for millions of people—from the largest questions of society to the most intimate details of their lives. In fact, Stennis first gained notoriety as a county prosecutor who convicted three sharecroppers of murder based on confessions that were discovered to have been coerced through torture, including flogging. This marked him as a man with a future in America.

But that was hardly the limit of John C. Stennis. Stennis also backed up the U.S. military invasions and proxy wars against countries all over the world, at a time when these invasions were taking millions and millions of lives, and ruining tens of millions more—from

Korea to Indochina to Central America, from southern Africa to the Middle East and beyond. Indeed, John C. Stennis was so reliably cold-blooded that he was made head of the Senate Committee on Defense from 1968 to 1980, and presided over the beginnings of the massive buildup of nuclear weapons by the U.S. that reached a climax during the '80s. During this whole period of time the U.S. claimed the right to a "nuclear first strike"—that is, the U.S. openly proclaimed as part of its strategic doctrine the supposed right to obliterate the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons if the Soviets dared to attack any European country with conventional, non-nuclear weapons. There was no war too genocidal, no weapon system too horrible, no doctrine too unspeakably obscene in its willingness to endanger human civilization and the species itself for what the U.S. ruling class perceived as its interests that John C. Stennis would not proudly thump his chest and approve it.

So it is fitting, really, that this aircraft carrier, now carrying out provocations as part of the buildup of what could very well be yet another unjust and extremely dangerous war, be named after this monstrous pig Stennis. For there can be no more fitting representative of what American democracy really stands for and means in real terms than someone whose life was dedicated to the violent subjugation of people all over the globe by the U.S. military machine and, above all, the particularly brutal domination of Black people within the U.S. And if it should come to pass that the U.S. uses an incident involving the John C. Stennis aircraft carrier as a *casus belli* [a reason for going to war], that too would be a fitting commentary on the real interests and character of what interests would be fought for and defended in such a war—and a fitting enough reason, among a million others, for a revolution to put an end to a system that nurtures and lionizes the likes of John C. Stennis, and to politically oppose and resist such a war as part of building a movement for such a revolution.

Toby O’Ryan is a contributor to Revolution Newspaper (revcom.us), where this article first appeared.

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