

FROM WASHINGTON OFFICE  
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### Senators Clash Over School Prayer Rule

WASHINGTON (BP)-- A Roman Catholic and a Baptist Senator clashed at hearings on prayer in public schools before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary.

Sen. Philip A. Hart (D., Mich.), a Roman Catholic, defended the recent Supreme Court rule banning "official" government prayers from the public schools. Sen. A. Willis Robertson (D., Va.), a Baptist, contended for prescribed prayers, provided they are not compulsory.

Both men spoke contrary to the publicly expressed views of leaders in their respective religious groups. Catholic spokesmen on the whole have denounced the Court's decision, while Baptist leaders have acclaimed the ruling as a victory for religious liberty.

During Robertson's attack on the Supreme Court, three members of the Committee sought to hold the Virginia Senator to the pertinent facts in the Court's ruling in the New York prayer case (Engel v. Vitale). Sen. Olin D. Johnston (D., S. C.), who presided over the hearing in the absence of the chairman, Sen. James O. Eastland (D., Miss.), pointed out that the discussion should be focused on the case in point and the facts in the specific ruling.

Sen. Roman L. Hruska (R., Neb.) repeatedly corrected Robertson's statements of the facts of the case and read into the record the Court's own explanations of the limitation of its decision.

Sen. Hart stated that the religion espoused by Bible readings and prayers in the public schools contradicted the religion taught his children at home. In response to Robertson's contention that prayers should be promoted by the public schools, Hart asked if it would be acceptable if the school board required that the prayer be the "Hail Mary" instead of the nondenominational prayer in the New York case.

Robertson replied that such would be as legal as the Lord's prayer, provided students who objected could be excused.

Hart also tangled with Sen. John Stennis (D., Miss.) who delivered a stinging attack on the Court and its ruling. Stennis declared that religious training in the home and in the church are not enough, that the public schools should be used to promote such instruction.

Others who testified at the hearing were Sen. Kenneth B. Keating (R., N. Y.), Sen. Vance Hartke (D., Ind.), Sen. J. Glenn Beall (R., Md.), and Sen. Strom Thurmond (D., S. C.). They contended either for an amendment to the Constitution to permit prayers and Bible reading in the public schools or for a Senate resolution condemning the Court's decision and stating that public school prayers do not violate the ruling of the Court.

The Senators were divided on the procedure to be followed. Some wanted quick action by Congress this year so the proposed Constitutional amendment could be rushed to the State legislatures for action in 1963. Others wanted to take deliberate action so no damage would be done to the First Amendment. They wanted delay so other cases could be heard by the Supreme Court to determine what the real effect of the prayer decision might be on Bible reading and Lord's prayer cases now pending in the courts.

It became clear during the hearing that much of the attack on the Court's prayer ruling was a protest against the Fourteenth Amendment and the school desegregation decision in 1954.

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Senator Johnston observed from the chair that the hearing was delving into a sensitive area in which the proponents of various views were likely to become "emotionally heated." He hoped that the hearings could be conducted in such a way that hot tempers would not lead to rash or hasty decisions that might damage the protection of the First Amendment "which is the foundation of our free society."

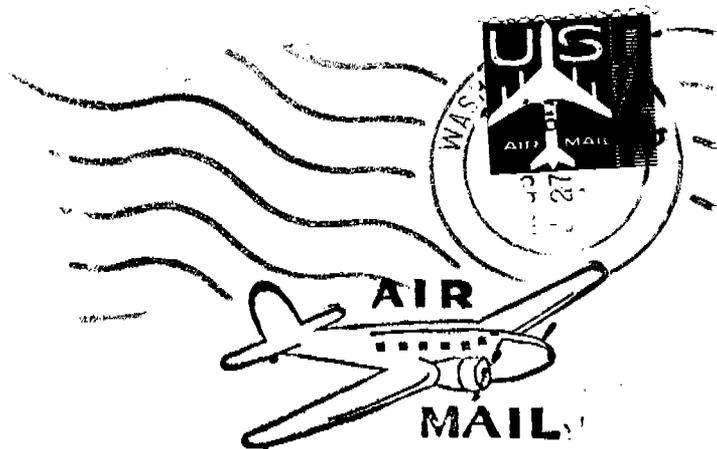
The hearing was adjourned after an hour and one-half to be resumed subject to the call of the chairman of the committee. There was an unexplained cancellation of the hearing for the following day. However, due to the large number of requests to be heard, both by organizations and individuals the committee has given assurance that the hearings will be continued at some near future date.

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