

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1985/11/17/former-senator-john-j-sparkman-democrat-from-alabama-dies-at-85/a0f9a852-4225-4761-8930-818ca45e146e/>

## **Former Senator John J. Sparkman, Democrat From Alabama, Dies at 85**

By Richard Pearson

November 17, 1985

Former senator John J. Sparkman, 85, an Alabama Democrat who served on Capitol Hill for more than four decades, who ran for vice president in 1952 and who chaired the Senate's Banking and Foreign Relations committees, died yesterday at a nursing home in Huntsville, Ala., after a heart attack.

Sen. Sparkman, who was elected to the Senate in 1946, was chosen by Illinois Gov. Adlai E. Stevenson as his 1952 running mate for the presidency. The Stevenson-Sparkman ticket, though finishing well ahead of President Truman's 1948 vote totals, was soundly defeated by the Republican ticket of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon.

Long an authority on housing, he served as chairman from 1967 to 1975 of what has become the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs. He then chaired the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, widely considered the Senate's most prestigious assignment, until he retired from the Senate on Jan. 3, 1979.

He earned mixed reviews as chairman of Foreign Relations. Many of the more aggressive Democrats in Congress lamented the fall of the committee's preceding chairman, Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) who was defeated in a 1974 primary election. They said that under Sen. Sparkman the committee had become a less important arena for foreign policy struggles.

What some saw as a change in the committee's importance, Sen. Sparkman saw as a philosophical adjustment. He told a New York Times reporter that his committee "does have an impact on foreign policy, but it doesn't make foreign policy, except insofar as the executive will take our advice and consent."

Although some members of Congress had seemingly endless disagreements with such executive branch figures as Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, Sen. Sparkman did not. He told reporters that Kissinger always came to the

committee when asked, always answered questions, and always kept the committee briefed.

If the views and manners of Sen. Sparkman seemed outdated to some, they had a long and honorable tradition. Since the closing days of World War II, it had always been the goal of leaders of both parties to operate a "bipartisan" foreign policy. Much of the bipartisan spirit, and the accepted roles of the president and Congress, became casualties of the war in Southeast Asia.

The congressional career of Sen. Sparkman also was long and not without honor. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1936, he served there 10 years before winning a special 1946 election to the Senate. He served in the upper house until retiring. Along the way, he gained a reputation as one of the brightest and most articulate members of his era and as the personification of the moderate Southern wing of the Democratic Party.

Yet, he was a man of his time and place. Like all senators from the Deep South, he broke with the national Democratic Party over civil rights. In March 1948, he announced that he could not support the election of President Truman, and supported Strom Thurmond's 1948 "Dixiecrat" ticket. Though he continued to oppose much civil rights legislation, he successfully fought Dixiecrats for control of the Alabama Democratic Party organization.

At the 1952 Democratic convention he served on the platform committee where he was largely responsible for the civil rights plank that was acceptable to both North and South. It was the ability to gain compromise, as well as his popularity on Capitol Hill, that made him a logical choice for the vice presidential nomination.

During his decade in the House, he fought for the Tennessee Valley Authority, farm loans and Social Security. During World War II, he was a leader on the old House Military Affairs Committee and became the House Democratic Whip in November 1945.

During his Senate years he continued to support a strong bipartisan foreign policy, voting for NATO, the Marshall Plan aid program and generally supporting the executive branch of the government on foreign and defense issues. He became an authority on the problems of small businesses and fought for omnibus

housing bills and for aid to education.

As head of the Banking Committee, Sen. Sparkman pioneered legislation ranging from the Housing Act of 1949, which established the federal urban renewal program intended to revitalize America's cities; to the Fair Credit Billing Act, which provides protection for both consumers and merchants. He also championed the fight for the small businessman. He authored and managed to enact such bills as the Small Business Act of 1953; the Small Business Investment Act and the Small Business Tax Act of 1958.

John Jackson Sparkman was born near Hartselle, Ala., on Dec. 20, 1899. The seventh of 11 children, he lived on a tenant farm until he was 21. The future senator sold a cotton crop he had raised, and with \$75, entered the University of Alabama. He worked his way through the school, earning bachelor's, master's and law degrees. He also was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, served as student body president and edited the school paper.

Before entering Congress in 1937, he taught at Huntsville College in Alabama and served in the Army in World War I. He practiced law in Huntsville from 1925 to 1937. Since 1979, he and a grandson, Tazewell T. Shepard III, maintained the law partnership of Sparkman & Shepard in Huntsville.

In addition to his grandson, Sen. Sparkman's survivors include his wife of 62 years, the former Ivo Hall, of Huntsville, and a daughter, Julia Ann (Jan) Shepard of Washington.

# John Sparkman

**John Jackson Sparkman** (December 20, 1899 – November 16, 1985) was an American jurist and politician from the state of Alabama. A Southern Democrat, Sparkman served in the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate from 1937 until 1979. He was also the Democratic Party's nominee for Vice President in the 1952 presidential election.

Born in Morgan County, Alabama, Sparkman established a legal practice in Huntsville, Alabama after graduating from the University of Alabama School of Law. He won election to the House in 1936 and served as House Majority Whip in 1946. He left the House in 1946 after winning a special election to succeed Senator John H. Bankhead II. While in the Senate, he helped establish Marshall Space Flight Center and served as the chairman of several committees.

Sparkman served as Adlai Stevenson II's the running mate in the 1952 presidential election, but they were defeated by the Republican ticket of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon.

Known as a segregationist proponent during the Civil Rights era, Sparkman was a regular voter against civil rights legislation and condemned the "judicial usurpation" of the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Sparkman signed the 1956 Southern Manifesto, which pledged opposition to racial integration and promised to use "all lawful means" to fight the ruling that put court power behind the integration of public institutions.

He became the longest-serving Senator from Alabama in 1977. Sparkman chose not to seek re-election in 1978 and retired from public office the following year.

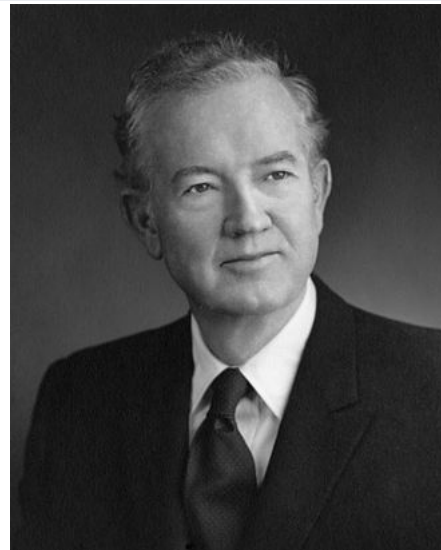
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## John Sparkman



### Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

#### In office

January 3, 1975 – January 3, 1979

**Preceded by** J. William Fulbright

**Succeeded by** Frank Church

### Chair of the Senate Banking Committee

#### In office

January 3, 1967 – January 3, 1975

**Preceded by** A. Willis Robertson

**Succeeded by** William Proxmire

### Chair of the Senate Small Business Committee

#### In office

January 3, 1955 – January 3, 1967

**Preceded by** Edward Thye

**Succeeded by** George Smathers

#### In office

February 20, 1950 – January 3, 1953

**Preceded by** Edward Thye

**Succeeded by** George Smathers

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## Early life and education

Sparkman, a son of Whitten Joseph and Julia Mitchell (Kent) Sparkman, was born on a farm near Hartselle, in Morgan County, Alabama.<sup>[1]</sup> He grew up in a four-room cabin with his eleven brothers and sisters. His father was a tenant farmer and doubled as the county's deputy sheriff. As a child, John Sparkman worked on his father's farm picking cotton.<sup>[2]</sup> He was reared Methodist.<sup>[3]</sup>

He attended a one-room elementary school in rural Morgan County, then walked 4 miles (6.4 km) every day to his high school.<sup>[4]</sup> Sparkman graduated from Morgan County High School in 1917 and enrolled in the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa.<sup>[5]</sup> During World War I, he was a member of the Students Army Training Corps.<sup>[6]</sup> Sparkman worked shoveling coal in the university's boiler room to help pay for his education.<sup>[7]</sup> He worked on *The Crimson White* (the university's newspaper), becoming the paper's editor-in-chief, and served as his class's student-body president.<sup>[8]</sup> Sparkman was awarded a teaching fellowship in history and political science,<sup>[9]</sup> he became a founding member of the Gamma Alpha Chapter of Pi Kappa Alpha in 1921, and was chosen as the university's "most outstanding senior" the same year.<sup>[8]</sup> He received his Bachelor of Arts in 1921, and his bachelor of laws from the University of Alabama School of Law in 1923. In 1924, Sparkman earned his master's degree in history, writing his master thesis titled "The Kolb-Oates Campaign of 1894," on former Confederate colonel William C. Oates's 1894 campaign for Governor of Alabama.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Legal career

Sparkman briefly worked as a high school teacher before he was admitted to the Alabama State Bar in 1925. He commenced his practice in Huntsville.<sup>[11]</sup> He was also an instructor at Huntsville College from 1925 to 1928.<sup>[12]</sup> He was appointed as a U.S. Commissioner (magistrate judge) for Alabama's northern judicial district, serving from 1930 to 1931.<sup>[1]</sup>

**In office**

November 6, 1946 – January 3, 1979

**Preceded by** George R. Swift

**Succeeded by** Howell Heflin

**House Majority Whip**

**In office**

January 1, 1946 – November 6, 1946

**Leader** John W. McCormack

**Preceded by** Robert Ramspeck

**Succeeded by** Leslie C. Arends

**Member of the  
U.S. House of Representatives  
from Alabama's 8th district**

**In office**

January 3, 1937 – November 6, 1946

**Preceded by** Archibald Hill Carmichael

**Succeeded by** Robert E. Jones Jr.

**Personal details**

**Born** John Jackson Sparkman  
December 20, 1899  
Hartselle, Alabama, U.S.

**Died** November 16, 1985 (aged 85)  
Huntsville, Alabama, U.S.

**Resting place** Maple Hill Cemetery

**Political party** Democratic

**Spouse(s)** Ivo Sparkman

**Education** University of Alabama,  
Tuscaloosa (BA, LLB)

**Military service**

**Allegiance**  United States

**Branch/service**  United States Army

**Unit** Student Army Training Corps

**Battles/wars** World War I



From left: President Harry S. Truman, Senator Sparkman (1952 Vice Presidential nominee) and Adlai Stevenson II (Governor, 1952 Presidential nominee) in the Oval Office

Sparkman was involved in many civic organizations, including serving as the district governor of the Kiwanis Club of Huntsville in 1930,<sup>[13]</sup> and later serving as the president of the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce.<sup>[14]</sup> A Freemason, he was life member of Helion Lodge#1 in Huntsville.<sup>[15]</sup> He was also member of the Huntsville Scottish Rite bodies and a recipient of the Knight Commander Court of Honor (KCCH).

## Political career

After Representative Archibald Hill Carmichael announced his retirement in 1936, Sparkman ran in the Democratic primary for the open seat. A teacher of the Big Brother Class at the First

Methodist Church in Huntsville, his campaign was successfully launched through fundraising, campaigning and advertising by students in his Sunday class.<sup>[14]</sup> Sparkman was elected to the United States House of Representatives in the 1936 election, defeating Union Party candidate, architect Harry J. Frahn<sup>[16]</sup> with 99.7% of the vote.<sup>[17]</sup> He was reelected in 1938, 1940, 1942, and 1944, serving in the 75th, 76th, 77th, 78th, and 79th Congresses.

According to his citation from the Alabama Academy of Honor ([https://archives.alabama.gov/famous/academy/j\\_spark.html](https://archives.alabama.gov/famous/academy/j_spark.html)), into which Sparkman was inducted in 1969, as a Member of the House of Representatives, "[Sparkman] gained renown for his sponsorship of such programs as the farm-tenant purchase program, rehabilitation loans for small farmers, and lower interest rates for farm loans. He was a champion of the TVA and REA."

In 1946 he served as House Majority Whip.<sup>[18]</sup> He was reelected in the 1946 House election to the 80th Congress and on the same date was elected to the United States Senate in a special election to fill the vacancy caused by the death of John H. Bankhead II, for the term ending on January 3, 1949. Sparkman resigned from the House of Representatives immediately following the election and began his Senate term on November 6, 1946. He served until his retirement on January 3, 1979, having not sought reelection in 1978.

He was chairman of the Select Committee on Small Business (81st, 82nd, and 84th through 90th Congresses), co-chairman of the Joint Committee on Inaugural Arrangements (86th Congress), chairman of the Committee on Banking and Currency (90th and 91st Congresses), co-chairman of the Joint Committee on Defense Production (91st and 93rd Congresses), Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs (92nd and 93rd Congresses), and a member of the Committee on Foreign Relations (94th and 95th Congress).

The 1943 *Sparkman Act*, which allowed women physicians to be commissioned as officers in the armed forces, was named for him.



In 1970 Wernher von Braun (right) was honored for his career in Huntsville, Alabama, with the celebration of "Wernher von Braun Day." Among those participating were Sparkman (center) and Alabama Governor Albert Brewer (left).

In 1949, Sparkman was instrumental in convincing the United States Department of the Army to transfer the missile development activities from Fort Bliss, Texas, to Redstone Arsenal. This brought Wernher von Braun and the German Operation Paperclip scientists and engineers to Huntsville, forming the foundation to what eventually became the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center. Von Braun selected Huntsville to relocate his fellow German engineers because it reminded him of Germany.

Sparkman was a representative of the United States at the Fifth General Assembly of the United Nations in 1950.<sup>[3]</sup>

In January 1951, Sparkman stated that he believed the Truman administration housing defense program could increase inflationary pressures, a view aligned with Republican Senators Irving Ives and Andrew Frank Schoeppel, but furthered that the plan was essential and should be undertaken regardless of inflation concerns.<sup>[19]</sup>

<sup>[20]</sup>On September 8th, 1951 he was the fourth signatory to the Treaty of Peace with Japan (with two declarations) (<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20136/volume-136-I-1832-English.pdf>).

In 1952, he was the Democratic Party's nominee for Vice President, running on the ticket of Adlai Stevenson. However, the election was won by the Republican candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Sparkman was slated against Richard M. Nixon, a senatorial colleague from California.

After the election, Sparkman in an interview expressed approval that American small businessmen were giving large firms competition for foreign aid contracts. "The large firms once dominated this field. Now we are insisting that the small business get a fair share of these contracts and it has had a good effect. The increasing competition has cut costs in the entire American foreign aid program."<sup>[21]</sup>

In January 1955, the University of Alabama News Bureau released remarks of Sparkman he had made during an interview following the 1954 midterm elections. Sparkman predicted a larger number of Democrats would cooperate with the Eisenhower administration, furthering that their tendency to criticize the Republicans rather than the president directly was ending, and Republicans, by contrast, would be more likely to oppose the president's foreign policy. Sparkman advocated for studying of the administration's defense program to confirm that the reduction in numbers would not be concurrent with a decrease in strength.<sup>[22]</sup>

On January 21, 1955, Sparkman introduced a bill authorizing 50 million dollars in appropriation each quarter of the year for GIs to see a reduction dependent on the sales of home mortgages to private lenders of properties owned by the Veterans Administration. In a statement, Sparkman argued that the past few years had seen a home loan program which had come up short in meeting the needs of GI applications and the government was making a profit from the loans to GIs.<sup>[23]</sup>

On February 2, 1955, during an interview, Sparkman said the US would have to weigh giving Nationalist islands to Red China if the United Nations succeeded in imposing a cease-fire in Formosa. He said the Eisenhower administration had a foggy attitude towards defending the islands.<sup>[24]</sup>

In February 1955, Sparkman criticized the farming policies of the Eisenhower administration, charging them with having hurt the financial situations of American farmers the most since before the beginning of World War II and that the plight of farmers would continue so long as legislation affecting controls on crop acreage and the flexible price support system was enacted.<sup>[25]</sup>

Sparkman delivered a speech at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Rome, Georgia on February 21, 1955,

assailing Republican economic promises as a hoax and asserting the Eisenhower administration was operating on a theory of trickle-down economics. He said the school and road programs of the Eisenhower administration were intended to deliver larger funds to investment bankers rather than children or those using highways, predicting that the enactment of Eisenhower's school program would not see a single classroom built in either Georgia or Alabama.<sup>[26]</sup>

On February 25, 1955, Sparkman predicted the Senate would approve the authorization of one and a half billion dollars of government insurance to be granted for housing mortgages, saying that if the bill was not enacted, "our housing program will come to a stop."<sup>[27]</sup>

In 1956, Sparkman was one of 82 representatives and 19 senators who signed the Southern Manifesto in opposition to the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education and racial integration. In 1956, the Democrats did not renominate Sparkman as Stevenson's vice presidential running mate, opting instead for U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver of neighboring Tennessee, partly because he had refused to sign.<sup>[28]</sup> In 1957, Sparkman voted against HR 6127, the Civil Rights Act of 1957.<sup>[29]</sup>

On June 30, 1961, President John F. Kennedy signed the Housing Act of 1961; Kennedy thanked Sparkman for spearheading "this bill through the Senate".<sup>[30]</sup> During the September 4, 1964 signing of the Housing Act of 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the latter expressed his "very special congratulations this morning to both Senator Sparkman and Congressman Rains of Alabama."<sup>[31]</sup>

In August 1961, the Kennedy administration reaffirmed its lack of interest in compromising on its five-year foreign aid program, Sparkman arguing that the administration faced the possibility of having to settle for a reduction in the program by two years.<sup>[32]</sup>

On July 9, 1964, President Johnson signed the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964 into law, noting Sparkman as one of the members of Congress who helped in securing the legislation's passage.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Later elections

In 1960, Sparkman defeated the Republican Julian E. Elgin of Montgomery, who received 164,868 votes (29.8 percent) in the Senate contest. Six years later, Elgin ran again against Sparkman as an Independent but polled few votes. In 1966, Sparkman defeated another Republican, John Grenier, the former state GOP chairman and an attorney from Birmingham, who polled 39 percent of the vote.

Initially, Grenier had planned to run for governor in 1966, and James D. Martin was poised to oppose Sparkman, as Martin had four years earlier against Sparkman's colleague, J. Lister Hill. However, The New York Times predicted toppling the "tight one-party oligarchy" would be a herculean task. Though Sparkman trailed in some polls, The Times speculated that he would rebound because Alabamians were accustomed to voting straight Democratic tickets.<sup>[34]</sup>

In his last Senate race in 1972, Sparkman easily defeated President Nixon's former Postmaster General, the Republican businessman Winton M. Blount of Montgomery, originally from Union Springs. Blount, running without a specific endorsement from President Nixon, first had to dispatch Republican intraparty rivals James D. Martin and state Representative Bert Nettles.<sup>[35]</sup>

On October 30, 1977, Sparkman became the longest-serving senator in the history of Alabama.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Death

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On November 16, 1985, Sparkman died of a heart attack at Big Springs Manor Nursing Home in Huntsville,



Alabama. He was eighty-five.<sup>[37]</sup> Survived by his wife and daughter, he was interred in Huntsville at the historic Maple Hill Cemetery.

Sparkman High School in Harvest, Alabama, Sparkman Park in Hartselle, Alabama, Sparkman School in Somerville, Alabama, Sparkman Drive in Huntsville are all named in his honor.

## Electoral history

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### 1972 Alabama United States Senatorial Election

**John Sparkman (D) (inc.) 62.3%**

Winton M. Blount (R) 33.1%

### 1966 Alabama United States Senatorial Election

**John Sparkman (D) (inc.) 60.1%**

John Grenier (R) 39%

### 1960 Alabama United States Senatorial Election

**John Sparkman (D) (inc.) 70.2%**

Julian Elgin (R) 29.8%

### 1954 Alabama United States Senatorial Election

**John Sparkman (D) (inc.) 82.5%**

J. Foy Guin, Jr. (R) 17.5%

### 1952 United States Presidential Election (Vice President's seat)

Richard Nixon (R) 55.2%

**John Sparkman (D) 44.3%**

Charlotta Bass (Progressive) 0.2%

Enoch Holtwick (Prohibition) 0.1%

### 1948 Alabama United States Senatorial Election

**John Sparkman (D) (inc.) 84%**

John G. Parsons (R) 16%

### 1946 Alabama United States Senatorial Election

**John Sparkman (D) Unopposed**

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## External links

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- [John Sparkman](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/7145162) (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/7145162>) at [Find a Grave](#)
- A film clip "Longines Chronoscope with John J. Sparkman" (<https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.95937>) is available at the [Internet Archive](#)

## U.S. House of Representatives

Preceded by <b><u>Archibald Hill Carmichael</u></b>	<b>Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from <u>Alabama's 8th congressional district</u></b> 1937–1946	Succeeded by <b><u>Robert E. Jones Jr.</u></b>
Preceded by <b><u>Robert Ramspeck</u></b>	<b><u>House Majority Whip</u></b> 1946	Succeeded by <b><u>Leslie C. Arends</u></b>

## Party political offices

Preceded by <b><u>Robert Ramspeck</u></b>	<b><u>House Democratic Whip</u></b> 1946	Succeeded by <b><u>John William McCormack</u></b>
Preceded by <b><u>John H. Bankhead II</u></b>	<b><u>Democratic nominee for U.S. Senator from Alabama (Class 2)</u></b> 1946, 1948, 1954, 1960, 1966, 1972	Succeeded by <b><u>Howell Heflin</u></b>
Preceded by <b><u>Alben W. Barkley</u></b>	<b><u>Democratic nominee for Vice President of the United States</u></b> 1952	Succeeded by <b><u>Estes Kefauver</u></b>

## U.S. Senate

Preceded by <b><u>George R. Swift</u></b>	<b><u>U.S. Senator (Class 2) from Alabama</u></b> 1946–1979 Served alongside: <b><u>J. Lister Hill</u></b> , <b><u>James Allen</u></b> , <b><u>Maryon Pittman Allen</u></b> , <b><u>Donald Stewart</u></b>	Succeeded by <b><u>Howell Heflin</u></b>
Preceded by <b><u>Edward Thye</u></b>	<b><u>Chair of the Senate Small Business Committee</u></b> 1955–1967	Succeeded by <b><u>George Smathers</u></b>
Preceded by <b><u>Styles Bridges</u></b>	<b><u>Chair of the Joint Inaugural Ceremonies Committee</u></b> 1960–1961	Succeeded by <b><u>B. Everett Jordan</u></b>
Preceded by <b><u>A. Willis Robertson</u></b>	<b><u>Chair of the Senate Banking Committee</u></b> 1967–1975	Succeeded by <b><u>William Proxmire</u></b>
Preceded by <b><u>J. William Fulbright</u></b>	<b><u>Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee</u></b> 1975–1979	Succeeded by <b><u>Frank Church</u></b>

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