

Jack Blum #5: The Senate

Naomi Fowler: This is the Corruption Diaries from the Tax Justice Network. I'm Naomi Fowler.

Jack Blum ended up working for the Senate Antitrust Sub-Committee, where he went on to do a lot of the work he's most known for. But he didn't go straight there. It's now the mid-1960s, and after going through college or university, his stint as a reporter, and finishing law school, Jack was figuring out how institutions work, the importance of personal relationships and other organisational dynamics.

Jack Blum: I interviewed in my senior year with the New York County District Attorney's Office. That was a big deal. Getting a job with that office was a big deal. I went for several rounds of interviews and then finally was called and told I was going to have an interview with the big man himself, and that was Hogan, who was then the District Attorney. And I got called down there and I went on a winter day, and, I just, a number of things happened. First, the smell of the building. To be blunt, it smelled like somebody had peed on every radiator in the place. And then I was told that if I accepted the offer my pay would be 4,500 dollars a year, and I was required to live in Manhattan. Now, even then, the year is 1965, even *then*, that was impossible, you know, I could pitch a tent in Central Park and maybe make it. And when I put together the general ambience of the office and all of the other conditions surrounding that, I must say that I, I told him, forget about it, I can't do this. And I wound up taking a job with the Federal Communications Commission.

I was assigned to the Broadcast Bureau at the FCC, and started working on station license renewals. I quickly figured out that this was an insane asylum for a number of reasons. They had no library of their own opinions. There was no publication of prior opinions. And when lawyers were working on these cases they had to get the printed copies that had been released from the law firms that were doing the applications. Scandalous to me that you'd go to the lawyers who were on the other side to get your basic legal stuff. Then I was put in charge of interface - this was when the Broadcast Bureau and the Commission were going to go digital, and they'd gotten this large computer, and I was supposed to be the one to work with the computer people to make it work with the Broadcast Bureau. And what I found was that they were basically using this very large, expensive computer as an electric typewriter. Right?! Something which I found nothing short of fantastic. Well, as time went on, I got really upset about it, and I was then in touch with people at the law school and they said, oh yeah, you ought to talk to Lee Levenger, who was then a member of the commission, and tell him what's going on, because you know, the word doesn't get from the bottom to the top very easily. So I did. I said it was outrageous, the Commission ought to have its own library, it ought to publish its own opinions, it ought to, you know, not throw its money away there. And by the way, as a consequence of all of this, everything is always routinely renewed without anybody asking any questions. And, and that's not good for anybody. Well, unbeknownst to me, Levenger was a pal of Drew Pearson's, the great sort of muckraker and fact digger and all the rest, and Levenger gave him all of the detail about what was going on in the Commission, quoting me without telling me that this was gonna happen. And I was in Los Angeles, staying at some pretty crummy motel while we were

trying to dig up more on the whole television industry and everything to get ready for hearings. And the switchboard at this motel just collapsed with these phone calls because it turns out that Pearson runs the column quoting me through Levenger. And the Chairman of the Commission who had been appointed by Kennedy, very well known, I've forgotten his name now. But he was one of those glamorous figures of the Kennedy administration. And he's like going nuts because he's been made a fool of. So, we decided the best solution all around was I no longer worked for the Commission, I now worked officially for the Senate, and that was that.

Each time I arrived in a new environment it was a massive learning experience, there was an awful lot to absorb. Then the staff of the Antitrust Subcommittee was pretty professional, long-term people who'd been around, who knew how the place worked, who knew how to do things, were all there, there was a man who'd worked, for example, with Harry Truman, when Truman was investigating war profiteering. Numbers of these people had worked with Kefauver during the period he ran the hearings on organized crime, so there were people with lots of experience in investigation and lots of experience in the institutions. And very quickly, I realized I had arrived at a moment where the institution of the Senate was very complicated, in that there were lots of old Southern Democrats who had come to the fore during the period of the Depression, who were in many ways populist and, you know, genuine populist, I'm talking now about wanting things like social security and, a whole array of things. And there were, in that mix, a number of, die-hard racists. So the chairman of the full committee, Judiciary Committee, was Jim Eastland, an unadulterated bigot who was shameless about it. He came from Sunflower, Mississippi. You know, no question, this guy was not big on civil rights. And, in fact, what had happened was Kefauver had made such a stink at different levels using the committee as a vehicle he decided, or the Senate decided that they weren't going to put someone in charge of that committee who would use it to make a lot of trouble, so they made Hart chairman, a liberal chairman, but they packed the committee with a bunch of Southerners. And we had this very delicate balance where, if you went out of your way too far, you'd run into a southern foghorn who might very well shut it down, so you had to sort of walk the line between these people. And we also had some northern liberals who were, liberal on one level, but very protective of all sorts of other interests on other levels, so it was a very complicated political environment.

Hart and Eastland had a very interesting relationship. On the one hand, they could repair to one of the hideaway offices and drink bourbon together. On the other hand, when it came down to the hard stuff, they were absolutely on opposite sides of the fence. So, the two stories stand out. Hart was running for re-election against Mitt Romney's mother. She was running to be senator for Michigan. Apparently, Eastland called Hart and said, I want to help you in your re-election campaign. Now, I'll do anything you want me to do. If you think it would help, I'll come to Michigan and speak for you. But if you think it would help more, I'll come and speak against you! Okay! That kind of thing was something you would discover as time went on, that there were personal relationships, but political differences, and very significant ones.

We got all kinds of complaints because the Sub-Committee was known for working in consumer protection and a variety of other areas. And one day, a call comes in to one of the staff people in the office who, just sitting there doing whatever and the call is from some woman who is completely infuriated with what happened with a warranty on her refrigerator.

So the guy wanting to give me a full dose of the experience says, let me put you through to our expert on refrigerators, Mr. Blum! Transfers the call to me and lets me catch the earful, which you know, is, is a good way of sort of training you in relating to the real world.

I had been out interviewing people in the course of an investigation and phone rings and there on the line, himself, unmistakable, Everett McKinley Dirksen. Everett Dirksen was the Minority Leader of the U.S. Senate, Senator from Illinois, a man who had a portraiture done of himself looking like Abraham Lincoln who was a character to say the least, but he was the minority leader of the U.S. Senate. And here he is on the phone, and he's reaming me out upside down and backwards. I'm thinking, oh my God, I'm going to be fired tomorrow. Well, he finally says, and don't you ever do that again! Bang, the phone goes down. I'm like sitting there in complete shock. And again, I was in this open office. There were four of us in the office and everybody in the room is laughing. And I'm saying, what's so funny? I've just been reamed, he said, don't you understand? He had the constituent who was the target of the investigation in the room, and he was showing off. And he'll never bother you again, he won't say a word about it, he won't even remember what happened. Right?!

Naomi Fowler: The Corruption Diaries is a production of The Tax Justice Network, made by me, Naomi Fowler and Jo Barratt. Interviews with Jack Blum were recorded over several days at Jack's home in Maryland by Zoe Sullivan.