

## Joseph N. Langan: The People's Voice

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On a small, mostly empty piece of land near downtown Mobile, Alabama, stands a bronze statue of two men shaking hands. The triangular section of land is an island in a sea of roads, requiring crosswalks. A viewer must access the crosswalks across many lanes of traffic in order to reach it and to read the descriptions of the ostensibly important men. On the inscription regarding one of the men, Joseph N. Langan, there are only two sentences mentioning his time in the Alabama Legislature. Although he also served in the military and as Mobile's mayor, that time in the Legislature, specifically in the state Senate as the sole member from Mobile County, is arguably the setting of his most consequential actions, where, in 1949, he defeated an amendment attempting to disenfranchise Black Americans of their vote (Kirkland, 2022).

The Boswell Amendment, passed by the Alabama Legislature and voters in response to the Supreme Court's 1944 decision in *Smith v. Allwright*, which outlawed all-white party primaries and made possible extensive voter registration for Black Americans, forced voter applicants to "understand and explain" any section of the federal constitution. The ability of the applicant to do that was at the discretion of an all-white county Board of Registrars, who denied Black Americans their vote at a much higher rate than their white counterparts (Kirkland, 2021). After almost two years in Mobile County, for instance, 2,800 white people had been added to the voter rolls (Kirkland, 2012). In the same amount of time, only 104 black people were added ("White Supremacy Setback," 1949). In 1949, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Alabama declared the amendment unconstitutional, so the Legislature attempted to pass the Voter Qualification Amendment, dubbed "Boswell Jr.," to circumvent the court's ruling (Kirkland,

2012). Langan, to the chagrin of those who wanted to “maintain and insure white supremacy in Alabama” (“The Shape of Things,” 1946) and the hundreds of thousands of voters who supported it, would not allow that to happen.

At 1 a.m. on September 9, 1949, the last day of the Alabama Senate’s session, Langan began the first pro-civil rights filibuster in the chamber’s history (Grossman, 2015). Supported by only four out of thirty-five total members of the Senate, the filibuster started with a journal reading and ended twenty-three hours later when the clock struck midnight, signaling the end of the chamber's session and the death of the amendment. Although the supporters of the amendment had the votes to pass it, Langan’s filibuster prevented it from ever getting a vote (“Alabama filibuster,” 1949).

According to Langan, even before his filibuster was completed, he was “castigated” by his own colleagues, and they hurled “defamatory remarks” against him (McLaurin, 1970). His fellow senators presiding in the chair attempted to “throw the rule book out the window” (McLaurin, 1970) in order to bring the amendment to a vote. But Langan would not stand down. With his 1950 reelection campaign a year away, it would have been much easier for him to put his career ahead of his conscience and silently fall in line, but he saw voting rights as non-negotiable.

He eventually did lose his reelection bid to Thomas A. Johnson, a segregationist supported by the Old Guard Democrats and an ally of Gessner T. McCorvey, sponsor of “Boswell Jr.” They had been determined to oust Langan ever since his opposition to the amendment became clear (Kirkland, 2012). Langan notes the “sole issue” of the campaign was that he supported rights for Black Americans and, therefore, should “not be elected” (McLaurin, 1970). But he never seemed to regret his decision. “It was nothing more than logical,” he said, “that every human being [...] was entitled to the same rights” (McLaurin, 1970).

After Langan defeated the Voter Qualification Act, a substitute amendment was never presented to the Legislature or voters again (McLaurin, 1970). By using a filibuster to further his objective of an equal society, Langan gave a voice to the very people who had historically been disadvantaged by use of the obstructionist tactic, which Southern Democrats had used to prevent civil rights legislation from coming to a vote in the U.S. Senate since the 1920s. Even though the senators filibustering the amendment represented less than 12% of the chamber's makeup, they spoke for hundreds of thousands of Black Americans who had been denied representation year after year in the Legislature (Grossman, 2015).

In the park near downtown Mobile, the bronze Joseph N. Langan is shaking hands with civil rights activist John L. LeFlore. Later in his career, Langan partnered with LeFlore to make Mobile a more politically, economically, and socially equal city (Kirkland, 2018). Langan's exemplification of that commitment, however, was demonstrated years before in the Alabama Senate. Risking his colleagues disliking him, his reelection campaign, and his bond with his constituents, the three things that, according to John F. Kennedy, impede political courage, he defeated a racist amendment aimed at discouraging the vote of Black Americans (Kennedy, 1961). And although Langan's memorial may be arduous to get to, the memory of what Langan did will not, as the Mobile Press-Register said, "soon be forgotten" (Kirkland, 2012).

After the forced desegregation of the University of Alabama, Kennedy declared, "The rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened" (Kennedy, 1963). With his filibuster, Langan defended not only the rights of Black Americans, but also the rights of each one of us.

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