Prayer for a Friend

On the evening of January 30, Senator John C. Stennis attended a reception at the headquarters of this Association, occupying a place of honor in the receiving line, meeting and talking with leaders of the National Guard and their guests from Capitol Hill and the Pentagon.

Less than an hour later, he lay in surgery at Walter Reed Army Hospital, fighting for his life after being shot down less than 50 feet from his own front door by two gun-wielding young thugs.

The shooting was a senseless act, perpetrated after the Senator had submitted without hesitation to armed robbery. His attackers gained little from the brutal crime: a wallet, a watch, and a 25-cent piece which many at the reception remembered him fingerling and flipping into the air while he chatted.

The tragic episode leaves one with a feeling of helpless outrage, that a man who deserved so much from his fellow-Americans should have been so grievously treated by a pair of hoodlums.

It is not difficult to compose a heartfelt tribute to John Stennis, for he has earned, many times over, a greater eulogy than I can contrive. But it is cause for the greatest regret when the words of praise for such a man must be uttered after so distantly an act.

John Stennis has spent most of his life in the service of his Nation, his State and his fellow-citizens. He has served all of them with the greatest distinction and dedication.

He is deeply and unashamedly patriotic—a quality which he neither hides nor flauts ostentatiously. He invariably treats others with consideration and old-fashioned courtesy.

He is one of a small coterie in Congress who, by their statesmanship, unquestionable integrity and rare personal qualities, have been elevated to the highest pinnacles of Senatorial prestige and personal influence. Few in Washington are accorded greater respect, and few have done so much to earn their grand stature.

Senator Stennis always has enjoyed, in particular, the trust and sincere admiration of the military community, for it is to the field of National defense that he has devoted most of his time and energy.

Leaders and members of the Armed Forces know him to be a staunch supporter, earnestly striving to give them the resources they need to perform their critical function.

National Guardmen felt a deep personal sorrow when word came that he had been so gravely injured only minutes after enjoying their hospitality. He believes in the Guard and in its unique status as a State-supported military organization, and we owe him much.

When he attended our General Conference in 1970, in New York City, we attempted to convey to him some small measure of our respect by the passage of a laudatory Resolution. Some of the terms we used then are no less applicable today.

In that Resolution, we noted that he had made "a total commitment of his energy, wisdom and loyalty to assuring that the United States shall have a defense force adequate to protect the freedom of the United States in the face of any threat." We commended him for "selfless, courageous and dedicated service in the cause of our country's freedom."

We repeat those words with equal sincerity today. He has our friendship, our admiration, and our prayers for his recovery and restoration to good health.