

James Oliver Eastland

(1904–1986)

James Oliver Eastland, widely known as “Big Jim,” served in the U.S. Senate for 36 years. Eastland was born in 1904 in Mississippi’s Sunflower County. After practicing law and serving two terms in the Mississippi legislature, he returned to his birthplace to run the family cotton plantation.

In 1941 Eastland was appointed to fill a vacancy in the Senate created by the death of Democrat Pat Harrison—on the agreement that he would not run in the special election to be held three months later. During his short term as a senator, Eastland earned credit for his work on agricultural issues and built a reputation that enabled him to run in the Democratic primary the following year and to defeat his replacement.

After his election to the Senate, Eastland served on the Agriculture and Judiciary Committees. In 1956 he became chairman of the Judiciary Committee, a post he held for 22 years, 9 months, and 26 days—among the longest continuous service of any Senate committee chair. Eastland also chaired subcommittees on internal security, immigration, and soil conservation and forestry. He served as president pro tempore from 1972 to 1978.

Eastland was known for standing firm in his beliefs. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana observed that, once having taken a position, James Eastland “proved almost impossible to move and indeed it requires nearly the entire Senate to budge him.”¹ Senator Eastland asserted at the end of his long career, “I voted my convictions on everything.”² He resigned from the Senate in December 1978 to give his successor, Thad Cochran, a few extra days of seniority. Eastland died in Doddsville, Mississippi, in 1986.

The Senate Commission on Art approved the commissioning of a portrait of James Eastland in October 1999. Eastland’s record for the longest consecutive service as chairman of the Judiciary Committee and his position as president pro tempore led to the decision to honor the former senator.

An advisory board composed of historians, curators, and a former Eastland staff member was established to review artists’ submissions and to provide recommendations to the commission. Herbert Abrams was selected to paint Eastland’s portrait and received the commission in 2000.

Abrams completed the portrait in 2001. Eastland is depicted in the Judiciary Committee Room in the Dirksen Senate Office Building, where the legendary senator spent so many years. Little has changed in the room since Eastland’s tenure, and Abrams shows the original 1950s walnut paneling and lighting fixtures. Of particular note is Eastland’s trademark cigar. In executing the portrait, Abrams consulted numerous photographs gathered from state and local archives. Former colleagues and staff members of the senator assisted by critiquing the portrait as it was being created.

Known for his portraits of prominent Americans, Abrams has painted presidents, cabinet members, generals, governors, senators, business and civic leaders, and famous personalities. The artist studied in New York City at the Pratt Institute and the Art Students League. He has taught art and lectured extensively. In 1997 he received an honorary doctorate from Johns Hopkins University. Abrams’s portrait of Senator Howard H. Baker, Jr., (p. 24) is also in the Senate Collection.



Herbert Abrams poses in his Connecticut studio with the completed portrait of James Eastland, 2001.

(Courtesy of Herbert E. Abrams)

James Eastland

Herbert Elmer Abrams (born 1921)

Oil on canvas, 2001

43 ½ x 29 ½ inches (110.5 x 74.9 cm)

Signed (lower left corner): Abrams•

Commissioned by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 2000

Accepted by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 2002

Cat. no. 32.00040

