Fred Thompson (R)

Of Nashville — Elected 1994; 1st full term

Biographical Information
Born: Aug. 19, 1942, Sheffield, Ala.
Education: Memphis State U., B.S. 1964; Vanderbilt U., J.D. 1967.
Occupation: Lawyer; actor.
Family: Divorced; three children.
Religion: Protestant.
Political Career: Assistant U.S. attorney, 1969-72.
Capitol Office: 523 Dirksen Bldg. 20510; 224-4944.

Committees
Governmental Affairs (chairman)
Judiciary
Constitution, Federalism & Property Rights; Technology, Terrorism & Government Information; Youth Violence



In Washington: As the new chairman of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee in the 105th Congress, Thompson found himself in a familiar position: investigating the alleged abuses of a sitting president.

This time, his subject was a Democrat, President Clinton, whose 1996 re-election campaign was buffeted in early 1997 by allegations of numerous infractions, including accepting potentially illegal contributions from overseas investors and revelations of other irregularities, such as overnight stays and exclusive coffees at the White House for big donors. The Senate in March 1997 voted to give Thompson's panel $4.3 million to probe allegations of both "illegal" and "improper" fundraising activities of Clinton's campaign, the Democratic National Committee and, unlike a related investigation in the House, congressional campaigns.

More than two decades ago, Thompson played a central role in the investigation of Republican President Richard M. Nixon. He was the top staff lawyer to then-Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr., R-Tenn., during the sometimes-televised hearings of the Senate Watergate Committee, and Thompson at times interrogated witnesses. One such witness, White House aide Alexander Butterfield, told Thompson that the Nixon White House knew what was said in the Oval Office because all conversations there were secretly tape recorded. The revelation of the "Watergate tapes" and the discussions of illegal activities recorded on them ultimately led to Nixon's resignation.

Thompson's role in the Watergate case, and the clean but tough image he developed in his first two years in the Senate, heralded his ultimate selection as the head investigator of campaign fundraising practices in the 1996 campaign. Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., tapped him for the job despite his junior status in the Senate, and the high-profile assignment further fueled speculation that the telegenic Thompson, a former character actor, may one day run for president, perhaps as early as 2000.

But in the early months of 1997, Thompson had his hands full coping with the controversies and perils that attend any high-stakes investigation by Congress. At the outset, he asked that his committee be allocated $6.5 million to do its investigatory work, a much larger sum than Democrats thought necessary, and so he heard an earful from them. He also angered conservative Republicans, such as Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, by seeking approval to peer into fundraising by congressional campaigns.

But the Senate vote to give Thompson's committee a still-generous $4.3 million and to assent to his request that its inquiry include "improper" activities put the Tennessean on solid footing as his panel began issuing subpoenas and preparing for public hearings. "It's a stamp of approval for Fred Thompson," said Thad Cochran, R-Miss., of the Senate's 99-0 vote in early March.

After Thompson was elected in 1994 to fill the final two years of Vice President Al Gore's Senate term, it did not take long for him to get a place in the Washington political spotlight. When Clinton went on television in December 1994 to announce his "Middle Class Bill of Rights," the Republicans entrusted their few minutes of response time not to a senior leader but to Thompson, a freshman senator-elect with little name recognition outside Tennessee.

But if Thompson's name was not familiar to many Americans, his face surely was. He had been appearing in major Hollywood productions for more than a decade. Moviegoers first saw Thompson playing himself, an underdog attorney representing actress Sissy Spacek in "Marie." He played a variety of authority figures, including an admiral in "The Hunt for Red October," a business executive in "Barbarians at the Gate" and a hard-nosed White House chief of staff in Clint Eastwood's "In the Line of Fire." Thompson got rave reviews for his response to Clinton's tax speech, delivering his brief remarks with such a blend of seriousness and homespun warmth that some commentators

immediately began predicting a major national role for the 52-year-old lawyer-actor and first-term senator from Nashville.

During his first two years in Congress, Thompson focused on many of the institutional issues he regarded as symbolic of congressional arrogance and remoteness. He sponsored a term-limits measure that fell two votes short of the 60 needed to halt debate on the Senate floor; he wrote language that denied lawmakers automatic cost-of-living adjustments in their pay; and he joined forces with John McCain, R-Ariz., and Russell D. Feingold, D-Wis., in their quest for changes to campaign finance laws.

The Senate fell six votes short of the 60 needed to close debate on that campaign finance measure, known as the McCain-Feingold bill, in June 1996. Clinton has advocated that measure as the best chance for compromise on campaign finance in the 105th Congress, and Thompson also has embraced the legislation again.

At Home: In Hollywood, Thompson learned how to get into character; on the campaign trail, he used the same technique. This time his role was that of the outsider, and it helped him score easy victories over former Rep. Jim Cooper in his first race and win re-election to his first full term over a lesser-known candidate in 1996.

During his first campaign, Thompson moved around Tennessee in a pickup truck, usually dressed in a flannel shirt or other casual clothes. In one late September appearance, for instance, he attended a tobacco rally in New Tazewell, where he chomped on a wad of chewing tobacco and had a cigar protruding from his shirt pocket.

He contrasted his background — a one-time night worker in a bicycle factory and son of a used-car salesman — with that of the 40-year-old Cooper, the son of a former governor, a prep-school graduate who became a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University and obtained a law degree from Harvard and who was elected two years after graduating to the first of six House terms.

Thompson did have a fair claim to insider status himself, a fact Cooper tried to exploit. Apart from his time as a staff member for Baker, Thompson had worked for years as a Washington lobbyist with some high-profile clients, including the Teamsters Union pension fund.

Cooper, however, was never able to pin the insider tag on Thompson, who also benefited from extremely effective advertising that for the most part was devoid of the negative tones of many of the season's campaigns. And Cooper, who had built a reputation in the House as a pragmatic centrist Democrat, had trouble energizing the more liberal core constituencies of his party, including black voters and organized labor.

He began as the clear favorite to succeed appointed Democratic Sen. Harlan Mathews in the seat vacated by Gore. But he saw his initial advantage in fundraising (he had nearly $4 million) all but erased by a late influx of dollars for Thompson. Cooper changed campaign and media advisers late in the season and, at the end, appeared to be in free fall. Thompson wound up winning 60 percent of the vote.

In 1996, Thompson used his formidable campaign treasury to run feel-good TV ads and tallied 61 percent, this time defeating Democratic lawyer J. Houston Gordon. Thompson was so confident that he took time off campaigning to help GOP presidential nominee Bob Dole prepare for the October presidential debates.

SENATE ELECTIONS

1996 General		
Fred Thompson (R)	1,091,554	(61%)
J. Houston Gordon (D)	654,937	(37%)
1996 Primary		
Fred Thompson (R)	266,549	(94%)
Jim Counts (R)	16,715	(6%)

Previous Winning Percentages: **1994†** (60%)

† Special election

KEY VOTES

1997	
Approve balanced-budget constitutional amendment	Y
Approve chemical weapons treaty	N
1996	
Approve farm bill	Y
Limit punitive damages in product liability cases	Y
Exempt small businesses from higher minimum wage	Y
Approve welfare overhaul	Y
Bar job discrimination based on sexual orientation	N
Override veto of ban on "partial birth" abortions	Y
1995	
Approve GOP budget with tax and spending cuts	Y
Approve constitutional amendment barring flag desecration	Y

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

	Receipts	Receipts from PACs	Expenditures
1996			
Thompson (R)	$4,232,418	$1,080,345 (26%)	$3,469,369
Gordon (D)	$800,607	$88,600 (11%)	$795,969

VOTING STUDIES

	Presidential Support		Party Unity		Conservative Coalition	
Year	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**
1996	36	64	95	4	89	8
1995	31	69	92	8	88	12

INTEREST GROUP RATINGS

Year	ADA	AFL-CIO	CCUS	ACU
1996	0	n/a	100	85
1995	5	8	89	83