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Spong rules out Senate, court bids

By James Latimer
Special Correspondent

WILLIAMSBURG — Neither judicial robe nor senatorial toga can lure former U.S. Sen. William B. Spong Jr. away from his unfinished mission as head of the Marshall-Wythe School of Law.

Spong made that abundantly plain as he began to tell friends that he would not be available for either of two high offices to which his name had been linked by speculation in recent weeks.

Answering questions last week from a pair of visiting newsmen whom he has known for many years, Spong effectively removed himself from the field of prospective candidates for the Virginia Supreme Court as well as the U.S. Senate in 1982.

A straw poll of Democratic State Central Committee members one week ago indicated Spong was clearly favored for senator by these active party workers. When members were asked to name their top three choices for the Democratic nomination, Spong led a dozen or so prospects with 137 points to the runner-up's 118.

Asked first if he were interested in running for the Senate



File Photo

William B. Spong Jr.
A quick and firm 'no'

was to be vacated by Harry F. Byrd Jr. on Jan. 3, 1983, Spong responded with a quick, firm "no." After a long pause, he added this one-sentence explanation:

"I think the Democrats need and should have a candidate whose appetite for public office is greater than mine."

His response to the question of whether he might be available for the Supreme Court

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Happy where he is, Spong asserts

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vacancy to be left Jan. 1 by the retirement of Justice Albertis S. Harrison Jr. seemed at first "a bit tentative."

"Well," he began, "I — [pause] — I will not ask that my name be considered for that position."

"It would be an honor to succeed Albertis Harrison on that court. But I'm not quite ready to leave here. I like what I'm doing, particularly the teaching, and I think I'll stay around a while."

What Spong has been doing since late 1975 is dedicating all his efforts to the rebuilding and improving of the venerable but once shaky law school that was founded under Gov. Thomas Jefferson and Professor George Wythe at the College of William and Mary in 1779.

Former "Young Turk"

A former "Young Turk" and state senator in the General Assembly; Democrat Spong was Virginia's junior U.S. senator in 1966-72. He was upset, a casualty, of the McGovern presidential debacle, by Republican William Scott, largely as a result of a slashing electronic media blitz financed in the closing three weeks by a \$250,000 "loan" from one man, the late J.B. Sletson Coleman.

After his defeat, Spong quietly withdrew from the public gaze to concentrate on more scholarly pursuits involving research and writing on legal and governmental policy matters, as well as practicing law and teaching law courses at several institutions.

Reporters and friends talking to him late last week got the impression he was so happily established in the academic world — he once said he was determined not to become a professional ex-senator, but to carve out a new career — that he was not about to leave

it now.

In his slowly spoken, deliberate way, Spong minimized the possibilities that any sort of "draft Spong" movement might develop for the court or Senate, and indicated strongly that he would decline if it did.

He has a commitment to himself to stay at W&M until certain things are accomplished, which means until some indefinite time in the future, he said. More than that, he cited approvingly a recent article that quoted him as say-

ing he and Mrs. Spong have never been happier than they are now.

That doesn't mean he might not eventually move on to something else, he said. He wouldn't speculate now on what it might be, but it quite evidently won't be toward the Congress, even if his age — he was 61 September 29 — were no consideration.

Recalling how he spent about \$133,000 on his 1966 campaign, Spong guessed it would cost \$2 million or more to wage the same sort of cam-

paign next year. "The obligations one might encounter in raising that money would be burdensome to me," he said.

What the Democrats need, he said, is "someone who hangs on for the position and is willing to begin right now and work full time for it from now on." No, he wouldn't suggest any names, but "I hope they will find a candidate ... who will continue the momentum that was undoubtedly started" by the Democratic sweep of the three top state offices this year.

(The 1981 election of Charles S. Robb as governor marked the first time Virginia Democrats have won either a gubernatorial or senatorial election since Spong and Harry F. Byrd Jr. were elected together as Democrats in 1966.)

"I was very happy being a senator. ... It's one of the greatest jobs in the world," he said. Then, with a little chuckle, he added: "I guess what you have to do to get there is something that you have to consider as well."