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Reluctant Republican, Nominal Democrat: Harry F. Byrd Sr. and Modern Republican
Conservatism

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
History Department

Examination Date: November 15, 2021

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Susan Eckelmann Berghel for the time and effort she has poured into mentoring me over this past year. I could not have asked for a more caring or passionate thesis director. Throughout this process she pushed me to keep going and was a constant voice of reassurance. She has been a great mentor to me, and she is someone who truly embodies all that is good and noble about the study of history. I would also like to thank Drs. Mark Johnson and Jeremy Strickler for so generously taking the time out of their busy schedules to offer their input on multiple drafts. At both the early and late stages of this work the insight their feedback provided was extremely valuable to the final product. I would also like to thank all those at the UTC History Department who have helped mold my work as a historian. I have been blessed to have associated with such a supportive community of scholars and mentors.

Introduction: Byrd's Place in the Historiography of Modern Republican Conservatism

“It is certainly a fact that the second rape of the South can be assuaged by selecting for President a Southerner and a Northerner as V.P. You seem to be the logical man...” J. S. Sheafe of Arizona proposed in a letter to Senator Harry Byrd Sr.¹ In 1958, Byrd's office was inundated with correspondence from determined conservatives across the nation who convinced Byrd to stay in the Senate in response to his retirement announcement after twenty-five years of service. American conservatives sought to find their place considering parties' shifting ideological orientations. To some degree, Sheafe's presidential ambitions for Byrd materialized when the senator was awarded eleven electoral points in 1960, making the already close contest between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy that much more difficult for the national Democratic party. The Democratic party is still reckoning with the legacy of Harry Byrd today.

On the floor of the Virginia State Senate during a debate over Harry Byrd's statue on the capitol grounds, delegate Jay Jones of Norfolk recalled, “My father was denied entry to an elementary school a mile away from where he grew up because of Harry Byrd's policies.” “I came [to the capitol] as a child for field trips,” Jones explained, “my father was a member of the General Assembly and having to walk by [the statue] with him, and I asked him ‘who is this man?’ and he choked up a little bit knowing [Byrd] didn't want him to go to school in the public school system in Virginia.”² In light of these recollections it is no surprise that Jones led the removal of Harry F. Byrd's statue from the Virginia State Capitol grounds during the summer of 2021. Pushing back against Jones's efforts, Republican Senator Jill Vogel prompted her delegates to recall “the positive aspects of Byrd's professional and political career, such as the

¹ J. S. Sheafe to Harry Byrd, February 15, 1958, Papers of Harry Flood Byrd, Sr., Accession #9700, 9700-b, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va. (Hereafter referred to as Papers of HFB Sr.)

² “Byrd Statue Removed from Capitol Square,” WTVR, July 7, 2021, <https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/byrd-statue-removed-from-capitol-square>.

creation of the Shenandoah National Park and the growth of *The Winchester Star* newspaper.” Importantly, Vogel also “reminded the Senate that other Virginia leaders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves.”³ This debate generated support from Republicans who advocated to keep a statue of a Democratic Senator that modern Democrats themselves wanted removed. Nearly a century of history, beginning with Harry Byrd’s first forays into politics, led up to this debate. His career complicates the narrative of Southern political party realignments. Despite some conservative opposition, the statue ultimately came down as quietly as Byrd rose to power. Sixty years after his death, Harry Byrd’s legacy remains contested, and this thesis will consider Byrd’s place in this history as a reluctant Republican, and nominal Democrat.

A consideration of the life and politics of Senator Harry F. Byrd provides further evidence that some Southern legislators broke with the national Democratic Party as early as the 1940s and articulated the main tenets of contemporary Southern conservative politics. A consideration of the internal struggles of the Democratic Party in Virginia within the context of the broader political landscape highlights the significance of Byrd’s career in the Senate and his role in the national Democratic party. In addition, this thesis will consider why Senator Byrd decided to remain in the Democratic party for the entirety of his career when so many of his Southern colleagues were changing party affiliations. I maintain that while Byrd’s policies resembled that of a nominal Democrat and perhaps even a reluctant Republican, his political loyalty remained with the Democratic Party. Byrd’s political career married fiscal and social conservatism all the

³ Bill Atkinson, “Statue of Virginia Politician, Segregation Champion Harry Byrd Sr. Will Leave Capitol Square,” Progress Index, <https://www.progress-index.com/story/news/2021/02/23/va-senate-votes-remove-statue-controversial-leader-capitol/4559473001/>.

while facing pressure from those within his party to submit to the tide of liberalization that would sweep over the Democratic caucus during his time in the Senate. In much the same way that he would be caught in between the Democratic and Republican parties, Harry Byrd's fiscal policies failed to shift across the decades as he moved from state to national government. In some ways Byrd's anti-deficit anti-debt policies served as a Dixiecrat's warning shot of fiscal conservative movements to come.

In *Politics of Rage*, historian Dan Carter chronicles the political career of mid-twentieth century segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace. Carter corroborates other historians who attribute "the Americanization of Dixie and the Southernization of America" to Wallace. Scholars have debated the significance of mid-to-late twentieth century segregationists such as Wallace, as well as Senators Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Barry Goldwater of Arizona in the migration of conservative Southern votes to the Republican Party. This thesis casts Byrd as one of the most influential Southern congressmen of the twentieth century, who held a considerable national profile during his time. Byrd has been overlooked, particularly in recent historical literature. A re-examination of Byrd's career enriches our understanding of some Southern legislators' departure from the national Democratic Party as early as the 1940s.

In recent years historians have revisited the narrative of the Southern political shift that took place during the 1960s resulting in Republican Party dominance in the South and reversing decades of Democratic Party rule. Rather than a sudden shift of the late fifties and early sixties, many scholars have traced the roots of this change to the New Deal Era. In *Racial Realignment*, Eric Shickler examines the liberalization of the Democratic party under the Roosevelt administration in the wake of New Deal's transformative policies. In response to the evolving racial demographics of the party, Southern segregationists increasingly relied on states' rights

rhetoric to prevent the implementation of New Deal policies. I argue that Senator Byrd's break from the Truman administration marks this beginning of the evolving political culture. After Truman's 1948 campaign Byrd would break with the national party when undermining his candidacy in Virginia. Senator Byrd's criticism of the Truman administration's expansion of the U.S. federal government, particularly regarding civil rights and budgetary expenditures at home and abroad, integrated fiscal and social conservatism. In *The Dixiecrat Revolt*, historian Kari Frederickson chronicles Southern resistance against the national Democratic party in 1948. Unlike Byrd, some Southerners wanted to split from the Democratic party completely and form a third party, but Fredrickson explains that the Southern bloc was not powerful enough within national politics to advance Southern priorities without the aid of the Democratic party.

In *Chain Reaction*, Thomas and Mary Edsall trace the rise of the conservative voting coalition at the expense of the Democratic party. It credits the Republican party's ability to exploit racial divisions within the Democratic party as a factor to its rise to power.⁴ In *Fear Itself*, Ira Katznelson examines the New Deal and its effects on Democratic party politics and American politics at large. Katznelson maintains that the Roosevelt administration attempted to hold the Democratic party together through a "pragmatic forgetfulness with regard to racial matters" but ultimately failed to unite unmoved conservative Southern Democrats with the growing liberal factions of the Democratic party.⁵ As the head of Virginian politics and as a respected Southern Senator during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, he led Democratic infighting during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

⁴ Thomas Byrne Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

⁵ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, First edition. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 168.

Senator Byrd's debt-reduction, a conservative stance on fiscal issues, echoes the twenty-first century Republican Party program. With the rise of the Taxed Enough Already (TEA) movement and its sudden grip on Republican Party politics, some of Senator Byrd's staunchest early political beliefs found traction with a much wider national political base fifty years after his death. Most of Byrd's contemporaries perceived these fiscal policies as penny-pinching. His cohesive fiscal agenda predates modern *Republican* conservative policies. The support Senator Byrd received in his later career, not only from Virginians, but from conservatives across the nation illustrates the way that Southern conservatism would capture a national audience. The outpouring of letters Byrd received imploring him not to retire in 1958 and the possibility of a Goldwater-Byrd independent ticket in 1960 highlight the ways in which conservatives outside the South supported Byrd's conservatism across party lines.

In "Of Byrds and Bumpers," historians M. V. Hood, Quentin Kidd, and Irwin Morris identified a combination of Democratic-push and Republican-pull theories that explain the Republican domination of Southern politics. Hood, Kidd, and Morris argue that "Black mobilization within the Democratic party" and Republican conservatism pressured white Southern Democrats to move toward the Republican voters.⁶ They argue it was a combination of these factors that caused the shift. These historians maintained that racial and economic shifts triggered both the liberalization of the Democratic Party and the growing inter-party competition between the Democratic and Republican parties in the South. Senator Byrd's political career helps write the narrative of how Virginia, a state with little inter-party competition but a prolonged intra-party power struggle fits into these themes. In the decades following

⁶ M. V. Hood, Quentin Kidd, and Irwin L. Morris, "Of Byrd[s] and Bumpers: Using Democratic Senators to Analyze Political Change in the South, 1960-1995," *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (1999): 465-87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2991802>.

Reconstruction Virginia would be dominated by the Democratic party, however, prior to Byrd, it had a history of machine boss politicians attempting to assert control. The most notable example of this was the machine of Byrd's mentor Senator Thomas Martin.

The way Harry Byrd chose to wield his political power remains underexplored in the scholarly literature. At a time of heightened debate and contest over the constitution, it is important to recognize that political organizations have historically subverted regional constitutions to consolidate power. Motives like efficiency and taxpayer savings were touted during the Byrd upheavals of the Virginia state constitution, but these masked the true aim to consolidate power in the governorship which Byrd would either hold himself or control by proxy for most of his career. Byrd's rhetoric exploited fears of "socialism" when it came to labor organization and civil rights issues. By suggesting a drift towards autocracy in the American government, Byrd helped preserve his base of power and support in Virginia. Byrd certainly evolved during his career of public service, but more than that, the unique and deeply regional form of politics Byrd conducted led him to often be at odds with national labels and political categorizations. Whether it was in his blending of capitalist, progressive, and conservative politics at the state level, or his marriage of fiscal and social conservatism with Democratic party loyalty and progressive pet projects at the national level, Harry Byrd defied political labels. His position as a party-boss allowed him to wander in a political desert with little fear of voter reprisal at times when his colleagues were not so fortunate.

In *Harry F. Byrd of Virginia*, Ronald Heinemann offers a comprehensive biographical narrative of Senator Byrd's political career. My research diverges from Heinemann's assessment of Byrd's later career and overall impact. Heinemann underplays the importance of Byrd as a Southern Senator. This thesis seeks to illustrate that in his interactions with grassroots

Republicans and Democratic administrations, Byrd was a critical figure at a time of great transformation for Southern politics. James Sweeney's work on Byrd considers the Virginian's life and career, recounting parts of Senator Byrd's nearly half-century in the role in politics. Sweeney's account traces the evolution of the public reception of conservative Southern Democrats including Byrd. In his thesis "Byrd and the Anti-Byrd" considers responses to Byrd's policies among his Virginian constituents and those who campaigned against the Byrd Organization in Virginia including liberal Democrats and Republicans.

Scholars have also addressed Byrd's contemporaries who acted as Byrd's loyal foot soldiers in Virginia while others vehemently opposed his "reign" over the Democratic party organization. Understanding the Southern Democrats that shaped the political landscape around Byrd can be revealing and help unpack some of the differences between Byrd and his major mid-century segregationist counterparts, such as Alabama Governor George Wallace. Historian Elizabeth Atwood's 2013 article "Dear Harry" documents the evolution of the friendship between James Kilpatrick Jr. and Senator Byrd over the last decade and a half of his tenure in the Senate. Her work reveals a great deal about Senator Byrd's attitude towards journalists as individuals, and the press as an institution. Having formerly been the editor of his father's local paper the *Winchester Star* (a position which he would in turn pass to his son shortly after his election to the Senate), Byrd had experience as a journalist himself. However, Atwood's analysis of his relationship with Kilpatrick asserts that by the time Byrd became a public official himself, his views shifted from a businessman who saw journalism to make money, to a politician interested in seeing compliance on the editorial pages of Virginia newspapers. Byrd was certainly not the first politician to demand journalists' favorable coverage, but the Kilpatrick case is of note because of Byrd's outsized influence over the state Democratic party in Virginia.

Byrd's sway over Virginia politics could make or break a journalist's career. Though their communications were always cordial, Atwood exposes the mutual benefits this relationship between Kilpatrick and Byrd brought.⁷

Other scholars have focused on the opposition to Byrd within Virginia. For instance, historian George Lewis examines Louise Oftedal Wensel's run as an independent candidate against Byrd during the 1958 Senatorial election. The 1958 senatorial campaign in Virginia was a landmark year for Byrd. After what would have been twenty-five years in the United States Senate, Byrd announced his retirement on account of the illness of his wife Anne. However, following a flood of constituent correspondence from both Virginians and conservative Americans who saw Byrd as a potential bastion against the growingly liberal national Democratic party, Byrd decided to run for a fifth term as the senator from Virginia. Despite the positive constituent response, popularity for the Byrd organization (where it ever truly existed in the first place) was already waning. An aging Byrd did not keep up with the changing political landscape that led even Virginia Democrats to embrace a more liberal candidate.

Soon after Byrd died, Virginia saw its first liberal governor in decades. Governor Linwood Holton attempted to reverse many of the segregationist policies of the Byrd Organization. Governor Holton was a Republican but following his term, a conservative faction overtook the Virginia Republican party which was bolstered by Byrd Organization members who changed party affiliation. It is likely that Harry Byrd Jr.'s official separation from the Democratic party led to this shift. Holton's successor Mills Godwin was a standard bearer for the Republican Byrd cronies. In this way, Harry Byrd Sr.'s effect on Virginian politics can be seen even after his

⁷ Elizabeth Atwood, "'Dear Harry,' 'My Dear Jack': The Evolving Friendship between James J. Kilpatrick, Jr., and Sen. Harry F. Byrd, Sr., 1949–66," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 121, no. 4 (2013): 372.

death, and Byrd himself was a significant contributor to keeping conservative Virginians in the Democratic party until the early 1970s.⁸

Wensel's candidacy against Senator Byrd came at a time of growing unrest over civil rights. When she filed her candidacy, she cited the massive resistance crises, as the school closings protesting integration in Virginia would come to be known, saying "Byrd's handling of the school crisis was very unfortunate" and that she would like to see the schools kept open.⁹ Unlike Wensel, Byrd was an unyielding segregationist. Though understanding that her odds were slim as an independent and an educated woman running for office in the conservative state of Virginia, Wensel campaigned with conviction, withstanding much of the intolerance slung at her, by the Democrats and the Byrd Organization. She garnered over twenty-five percent of the vote across the state. These results undercut electoral predications and sent a warning shot to the well-established Byrd organization. In many ways, this election signaled the first crack in the Byrd machine. Though much of the Organization's waning can be tied to Senator Byrd's growing senility, Wensel's campaign highlights that despite the prevalence of segregationist voters, Byrd's political vision jeopardized the conservative stronghold he once established. Lewis notes the "49.3 percent increase since the 1954 Senate race" in voter turnout.¹⁰ This is important because it shows that although Wensel may not have been victorious in the election, she succeeded in increasing voter turnout. Wensel cited low voter turnout as one the electoral foundations of the Byrd machine. In October of 1958, she maintained: "There are 950,000

⁸ John C. McGlennon, "Virginia's Changing Politics," in *The South's New Politics: Realignment and Dealignment*, by Robert H. Swansbrough and David M. Brodsky (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 57–58.

⁹ "Senator Byrd Has Opponent", *Lebanon News* (Lebanon, Virginia), 31 July 1958, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive, <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=LN19580731.1.1&srpos=3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-louise+oftedal+wensel----->.

¹⁰ George Lewis, "'Any Old Joe Named Zilch'? The Senatorial Campaign of Dr. Louise Oftedal Wensel," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 107, no. 3 (1999): 316.

registered voters in Virginia. About 250,000 of them are usually drawn in by the Byrd machine. My problem is to get those 700,000 who stay at home on election day to show their protest for Byrd by voting for me.”¹¹

Historian Glenn Feldmann’s essay collection *Painting Dixie Red* addresses the electoral shift away from the Democratic party and towards Republicanism in the South. The scholars featured in Feldmann’s edited volume present opposing viewpoints about the push-pull theories, and the various strategies that helped Republicans win the South. Eisenhower’s suburban strategies, which reveal that he likely had an eye toward making political inroads in the entire South and his friendship with Senator Byrd, only aided in this mission. It was during Eisenhower’s candidacy that Byrd began his practice of “Golden Silence” (which he continued in future presidential races until his death in 1966), a refusal to endorse either the Republican or Democratic presidential ticket. Years later, in his review of J. Harvie Wilkinson’s *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics* in Clinch Valley College’s student newspaper the *Highland Cavalier*, Ron Farmer explained, “These so-called ‘golden silences’ had angered many Virginians who had come to believe that if Virginia was to get into the mainstream of American life it was to do so by sticking closely to the national party.”¹² Conversely national Republicans, including President Eisenhower’s staff, would praise Byrd for helping create “balance” during the president’s term in office, singling him out as particularly helpful among his Democratic colleagues. As chairman of the Senate Finance Committee during Eisenhower’s time in the White House, Byrd did not always see eye to eye with the president, but Eisenhower’s budgets

¹¹ “‘Quite a Revelation,’ View of Dr. Wensel”, *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA), 23 October 1958 — Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive,” <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19581023.1.1&srpos=4&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-louise+oftedal+wensel----->.

¹² “Cavalier’s Corner Reader’s Choice: Byrd, Past and Present”, *Highland Cavalier* (Clinch Valley College, Wise, Virginia), 30 August 1971 — Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive,” <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=HLC19710830.1.4&srpos=4&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-golden+silence+byrd----->.

were the closest to his satisfaction of any executive plans during his time in the Senate. And, in the areas where the Eisenhower administration did grow the federal budget, Byrd was willing to concede support due to the military necessities brought on by the Korean war. Byrd's support for the national military programs revealed his embrace of fiscal and social conservatism. Byrd campaigned against programs that would have aided the least privileged and helped racial minorities economically advance. Not only did Harry Byrd support the racial segregation but he opposed programs that would have attempted to close the economic gap between white and Black Americans.

More broadly, however, Feldmann's collection of essays provides insight into what it means to have been "Southern" during the twentieth century. First, the support for military endeavors, which has its roots in the "still fighting the Civil War" mentality.¹³ The glorification of the "Lost Cause" narrative in the wake of the Civil War, which reached a crescendo during Senator Byrd's time in politics, helped consolidate the old Confederacy together into one political landscape. Secondly, Feldmann characterizes the South as a conservative, and increasingly reactionary throughout the twentieth century. He points out that as the overall liberalization of the United States increased, Southern reactionaries grew more entrenched.¹⁴ As demonstrated by his orchestration of the massive resistance crisis, his deficit-hawk financial policies, and romanticization of Virginia's (and the South's) place in American history, Byrd fashioned himself to be among those reactionaries longing to return to a time gone by, that perhaps never really was.

¹³ David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Glenn Feldman, *Painting Dixie Red: When, Where, Why, and How the South Became Republican*, *New Perspectives on the History of the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).12.

Feldmann also points to a stagnant South that resisted growth and rejected nation-wide changes. He claims that the Republican Party *and* the United States shifted towards alignment with the South following the increasingly liberal Democratic party stranding its conservative wing and the intra-party struggle that ultimately ended in the triumph of reactionaries and evangelicals over the moderate wing of the Republican party. Byrd's brand of politics would be among those left behind by the Democratic party, and he inched closer to the Republican party (and visa versa) throughout his career. Feldmann maintains, "The South did not move so much as the nation did."¹⁵ In other words, the larger cultural struggle behind the Republican capture of the South resulted in the Southernization of American values rather than the other way around. The outpouring of letters Byrd received from Republicans nationally imploring him not to retire in 1958 and stressing the ways in which they felt he represented their interests in the Senate even if they were not his constituents highlight the ways in which conservatives outside the South supported Byrd's conservatism across party lines, and the ways Byrd would be more in line with Republicans around the nation than many of his own constituents by his last term in the Senate.

Understanding the political landscape surrounding Senator Byrd and his role in it provides broader context of the party realignment in the South. Much of the latter half of Byrd's time in the Senate was consumed with as much infighting and obstructionism within the Democratic party as opposition to the Republican party. In fact, one of the questions this thesis seeks to answer is why Senator Byrd remained in the Democratic party at all, particularly at that time during his career when progressives distanced themselves from conservatives within their own circles. Any party seeking to win white Southern votes had to align its values with the South. As the Republican party made inroads into the South, Senator Byrd, though an unyielding

¹⁵ Feldman, *Painting Dixie Red*, 321.

and aging partisan, served as a model to those who sought to capitalize on the votes of white old Southern Conservative Democrats who embraced the vein of Southern conservatism and would successfully succeed him in the years and decades to come.

Senator Byrd remains an under-considered political figure in the historical narrative of the downfall of the Democratic party in the South. Though no one politician could have kept the Southern stronghold within the Democratic ranks, Byrd represented a prominent Southern state and was among those who led the conservative faction of the Democratic party that refused to submit to the party's wave of liberalization. Byrd would not officially leave the Democratic party in his lifetime, but his membership hindered the national party as the party's priorities shifted away from his own. Byrd scholars tend to embrace a "eulogy" approach that celebrates his accomplishments and mainly focuses on narrow aspects of his political career without acknowledging how his vision and actions shaped the course of the Democratic Party. In the five years following his death, scholars praised the personal character and ambition of Senator Byrd, while overlooking some of the political aims. This research aims to situate Byrd within the context of the evolution of his entire political career as well as the broader shifting political landscape of his time. There are key issues such as civil rights and fiscal policy where Byrd broke most sharply with the liberal faction of the Democratic party, but these issues should be considered within the context of his entire career for a fuller understanding of Byrd's place in Democratic party politics and Republican Party ascendancy.

This research takes a broader look at Senator Byrd's role in shaping the political landscape in the South by shedding new light on Senator Byrd's nearly half-century in political office through two previously unexamined historical lenses. First, this work considers Senator Byrd's life and domination of Virginia's state politics in light of the downfall of the regional

Southern Democratic dominance, and the national party polarization between conservative and liberal factions into the Republican and Democratic parties respectively. Second, this work considers the way in which Byrd represented Southern politicians and businessmen through his conservative vision. At a time when American politics generally underwent great upheaval and change, Senator Byrd tied his principles and political works to some of the most conservative elements in national politics, and thus has proven Feldman's point about the fundamental and unmovable conservative tendency of Southern politics.¹⁶ As displayed in the pressure placed on Byrd to remain in the Senate in 1958 and the electoral results of the 1960, Byrd's conservatism would draw supporters from across the South and across the nation. At a grassroots level, Republicans urged Byrd to carry out his conservative policies and make a run for the White House. All the while, he quietly clung to the Democratic Party to wield his influence over Virginia, and to retain his power in national politics.

The Early Byrd

This section chronicles the evolution from state politician in his early career to national politician in his later career. First, he became demonstrably more conservative on racial and social issues from his time passing progressive legislation in the Virginia State Senate to his time in the U.S. Senate during which he opposed welfare expansion of the federal government and civil rights legislation. Secondly, during his time in office at the state level, particularly as governor in the late 1920s, he focused on making the state government more fiscally efficient thereby lowering the tax burden on Virginians. However, following the Second World War, as a senator, he turned his attention to balancing the budget to benefit the economy. During his time in United States

¹⁶ Feldman, *Painting Dixie Red*, 321.

Senate, Byrd increasingly relied on obstructionism, and he buried his head in the sand on many of his more anachronistic policies, including his railing against almost every increase in government expenditures following the Second World War.

Harry Byrd hailed from neither a particularly wealthy, nor particularly poor family, but one with long roots in Virginia state history.¹⁷ By virtue of being raised in rural turn-of-the-century Virginia, biographers describe Byrd's upbringing as modest. Perhaps, Byrd's fiscal policy and his rejection of policies that were born out of his experience coming of age at a time when Virginia was burdened by massive debt. It is also clear that he was influenced by his father, a Democrat, who was a moderately successful businessman and already imbued the Byrd name with prestige through his rise in state politics.¹⁸ His father and family name opened many doors for Byrd's career in state politics. His first public position began as an editor in 1903 with the family newspaper *The Winchester Star*.

Virginus Dabney, a fellow journalist, editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and occasional critic of the Byrd organization, eulogized Byrd history noting "young Byrd, aged 15, turned the bankrupt *Winchester Star* into a profitable paper. This achievement foreshadowed the extraordinary career of a man who, by his high character, practical sense, indomitable energy, and great ability became Virginia's political leader for forty years."¹⁹ Byrd pulled the paper out of debt and would even expand its scope and readership by continuing to buy and establish other newspapers in the Shenandoah valley. This method of expansion was characteristic of his early forays into state politics. However, it seems that rather than developing a journalist's

¹⁷ Feldman, *Painting Dixie Red*, 321.

¹⁸ Alden Hatch, *The Byrds of Virginia*, 1st ed. (Virginia: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 401–2,

¹⁹ Virginus Dabney, review of *Review of The Byrds of Virginia*, by Alden Hatch, *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 78, no. 1 (1970): 117–18.

investigative approach of government and institutions, Byrd drew on his experience as a businessman in shaping his desire for government efficiency and centralization.

Byrd inherited a place in state politics from the stature of his father, Richard Byrd, as Speaker of the Virginia State House of Delegates.²⁰ Harry Byrd was his father's immediate successor in the House of Delegates in 1915.²¹ He had made a name for himself as President of the Valley Turnpike Company, a toll highway, which would spark his interest in the expansion and funding of highways at the state level.

During his term in the House of Delegates, he helped form the Byrd organization. Much of the infrastructure of the early Byrd Organization would be inherited from the "Martin Machine." Machine politics dominated Virginia since the early 1890s and the rise of the Bourbon Democrats. In Harry Byrd's early forays into state politics, U.S. Senator Thomas Martin, a Byrd family friend, would serve as his mentor. Having inherited both the Flood and Byrd political lineages, Harry Byrd was in an ideal position to assume leadership of this Organization upon Martin's death in 1919. Byrd carried over the Martin Machine into the Byrd Organization. The Organization dominated Virginia politics, particularly during Byrd's time as governor.²²

One of Byrd's most significant political missions and first major accomplishments of his career was the pay-as-you-go roads plan. This plan ensured that the people of Virginia received the government services they needed. In this way, the plan represented a hallmark of the "Progressive Byrd" who was willing to expand the scope of state government to give Virginians

²⁰ "Organization Men Get Four of Five Jobs," *Culpeper Exponent* (Culpeper, VA), 27 March 1914, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive," <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=TCX19140327.1.7&srpos=5&e=-1914--1916--en-20--1--txt-txIN-richard+byrd----->.

²¹ "Drys' Hold the Virginia Legislature," *Culpeper Exponent* (Culpeper, VA), 6 August 1915, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive," <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=TCX19150806.1.9&srpos=11&e=-1914--1916--en-20--1--txt-txIN-richard+byrd----->.

²² Alden Hatch, *The Byrds of Virginia*, 236, 414, 422.

necessary services. This Byrd stood in stark contrast with the conservative U.S. Senator Byrd he would become. Byrd's position as a toll road manager revealed the deeply capitalistic nature of the plan. Byrd advocated for raising the taxes of Virginians. To pay for the expansion of the highway system in Virginia an extra cent would be levied in the gas tax. This increase in taxation was so minimal that it seemed like a fair trade to many Virginians. The Pay-As-You-Go roads plan was one of the many areas, especially in his early career, where it is difficult to fit Byrd into one political category or another.

Richmond-News Leader writer and future Poet-Laureate of Virginia, Carter Wormeley wrote "The gas tax is of only a nominal cost to the state at a fraction over one-tenth of one percent."²³ Wormely's opposition to Byrd's tax policies, at least early in his political career, was not necessarily against taxation. Rather he preferred regressive taxation such as a gas tax, or sales tax, to a progressive income or property tax.

²³ Carter Wormeley, "State Gas Tax Shows Increase," *Richmond News-Leader* (Richmond, VA), November 2, 1925, Box 110, Papers of HFB Sr. "CARTER W. WORMELEY; 'Poet Laureate of Virginia' Was Publicity Director for State," *The New York Times*, August 25, 1938, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1938/08/25/archives/carter-w-wormeley-poet-laureate-of-virginia-was-publicity-director.html>

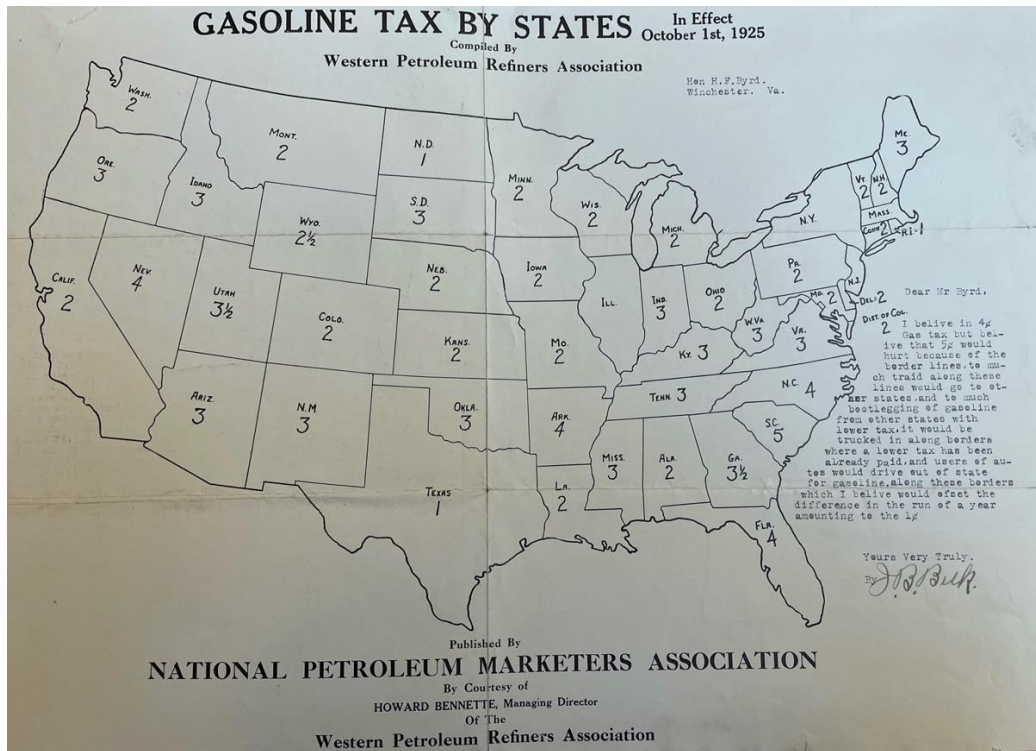


Figure 1: Gasoline Tax Map from J. B. Burch²⁴

Most Southern states did not adopt regressive taxation policies until after the Great Depression during which they were forced to choose between accepting federal aid and raising taxes to fund their governmental services themselves. The fear that federal funds would cede power to a growingly liberal federal government led most states to abscond federal funds but retained clauses in their own state constitutions that allowed levying higher property taxes extremely difficult. Thus, Southern legislators decided to levy regressive sales taxes, which placed much of the burden on the already impoverished, to fund their governments. In Figure 1, the map, published by the National Petroleum Marketers Association Byrd, lays out the gasoline taxes by state. Byrd's confidant J. B. Burch pointed out that raising the gasoline tax put Virginia as a competitive disadvantage with its border states. In fact, Burch was worried that if the tax were to get to five cents a gallon, Virginians, who lived on the border, would purchase to their

²⁴ Gasoline Tax Map from J. B. Burch, Box 91, Papers of HFB Sr.

gasoline in border states, and thereby significantly diminish the taxable sales of gasoline in Virginia. This map and Burch's commentary show that Virginia was stepping toward regressive taxation even more than many of its Southern contemporaries. Byrd's Pay-As-You-Go legislation represented a form of taxation and government funding that became prominent throughout the South nearly a decade later, marking an early split between the fiscal concerns of Southerners and national Democrats. Though he supported progressive infrastructure services, Harry Byrd showed that even before he took up residence in the governor's mansion that he had his finger on the pulse of white Southern politics and was often several steps ahead of his Southern contemporaries who would eventually turn to these policies after the modern Republican Party gained power.

Byrd would use the Pay-As-You-Go Roads plan as a steppingstone towards greater ambitions. Inheriting his father's mantle of statewide prominence, Byrd began to assemble a coalition to take over the governor's mansion in the election of 1925. Much of the hierarchical political infrastructure that shaped his Byrd machine he inherited from his uncle Henry Flood who served in the U.S. House of Representatives and was himself a foot soldier in the political patronage system of the U.S. Senator, and former Confederate, Thomas Martin. In many ways the Martin system under which Harry Byrd cut his teeth in politics in the 1910s expedited his early career in politics and allowed him to rise to prominence statewide, first as Chairman of the Virginia State Democratic party and later as Governor at an exceptionally young age. Indeed, Harry Byrd would go on to become the youngest Governor of Virginia since Thomas Jefferson a man for whom he had so much admiration. In 1926, shortly after his election, Byrd would speak at Monticello marking the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. He said, "More than others, a Governor of Virginia cannot feel that Mr. Jefferson is a remote

historic patronage for he was my predecessor when he was only thirty-six years old, he planned much of the building where the people for a season permit me to do my work and I am accustomed to pass frequently his figure in marble.” Byrd linked himself as a political and ideological descendent of Jefferson and it seems that the role of Jefferson the Virginian in laying the foundation for the Democratic party shaped his views of the party’s place in white Southern heritage. Byrd further noted: “[Jefferson’s] hostility to the privileges of many prominent personages and his advanced perhaps sometimes mistaken ideas draw down upon him a torrent of natural but unfair abuse: abuse that distorted the historic portrait of this amazing man.”²⁵ The effects of his inherited power and connections which culminated in the Byrd Organization manifested as a defining reason for Byrd’s over thirty years in the U.S. Senate.²⁶

Byrd inherited his statewide name recognition from his family. However, his advocacy for the development of state highway systems all the while shifting the state government away from further bond issuing resonated with his Virginian constituents and allowed him to forge his own path. In what was thought to be a defeat for the Byrd organization, the Pay-As-You-Go roads plan went to a ballot measure in 1922. Byrd’s anti-bond, anti-debt campaigning received a mandate from Virginia voters in the form of a “substantial: 127,187 to 81,220.”²⁷ Byrd’s true political savvy became evident when launching himself into statewide office. He rewrote the Virginia state constitution in ways that would ultimately minimize the power of Virginian voters over the Byrd Organization. Following his chairmanship of the state Democratic party in 1922, Byrd put into place restrictions on voting requirements in Democratic primaries that were ultimately beneficial to the Byrd machine.

²⁵ “Thomas Jefferson, Monticello”, Box 357, Papers of HFB Sr.

²⁶ Ronald L. Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 1st ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 59.

²⁷ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 42.

These restrictions on access to voting in Democratic primaries represents one of the first clear examples that the Byrd machine relied on low voter turnout and suppression of African American voters to maintain its power. In addition to distancing himself from these policies in years to come, Byrd became a victim of this restriction when the Republican party gained power during the final decades of his career. When the political landscape changed and many Republicans had no real ideological reasons to separate themselves from Byrd, they based their opposition to him on his machine-style Byrd Organization politics. This is seen in the 1958 campaign of Dr. Louise Oftedal Wensel which likened Byrd's dominance over the Democratic party in Virginia to Soviet Russia. She said, "Unless someone comes forward to be Republican candidate for the United States Senate, Virginians like Russians will have only one choice in the next election."²⁸ Virginia's partisan Republicans opposed the Byrd machine on the grounds of the problematic way the Byrd Organization sought to control politics.

Byrd's Years as Governor

During the 1920s, the Virginia Democratic party dominated in state's politic landscape. As Byrd consolidated his power over the Virginian Democratic party, the 1925 Gubernatorial race increasingly appealed to Byrd. As a result, he decided to launch a campaign against Progressive G. Walter Mapp. This race for governor would sharpen the divide between the efficiency-based policies of the Byrd Organization and the Progressive services and values of non-Organization Democrats. While Mapp's progressive supporters hoped to expand the state government's capabilities to provide quality-of-life improvements to its citizens, the Byrd faction campaigned on reforming a state government in disarray as a means of aiding Virginians. Byrd sought to

²⁸ Lewis, "Any Old Joe Named Zilch," 295.

centralize the government of Virginia and streamline the organizational hierarchy to answer to the executive. In short, he felt the government of Virginia would operate more efficiently if it operated more like a business, with the Virginian voters as its shareholders. Reducing the debt by cutting governmental departments was a key priority for Byrd in making the government of Virginia more efficient.

To implement changes, he proposed multiple amendments to the state constitution. Byrd adopted many of the same tactics of consolidating power as a governor from his tenure as Chairman of the Democratic Party. When the politics of his state were not conducive to Organization priorities or jeopardized its control, he simply changed the rules of the game. Governor Byrd appointed Robert Prentis, the president of the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals to chair a commission investigating necessary constitutional amendments that might make the Virginia state government more efficient. In addition to the Prentis Commission, he also appointed longtime political ally and Organization leader Billy Reed to head a committee of businessmen to submit their recommendations of changes to the structure of the Virginia state government.²⁹ Byrd often spoke of his approach to executive leaders in the state like that of a businessman running a corporation. Within the first few months of Byrd's time as governor he contracted an out-of-state agency, the New York Municipal Bureau, to conduct a professional review of the Virginia state government and recommend areas in which it could be governed more efficiently. For years Byrd had attempted to amend the Virginia state constitution to increase the appointment power of the governor.

²⁹ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 66–67. and Laurence J. O'Toole, "Harry F. Byrd, Sr. and the New York Bureau of Municipal Research: Lessons from an Ironic Alliance," *Public Administration Review* 46, no. 2 (1986): 114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/976163>.

The New York Bureau went much farther in its suggestions of state overhaul than the Byrd organization initially anticipated. Though it seemed that the two groups' goals were in line at the start of Governor Byrd's term (given Byrd's control over state politics), the degree to which he was personally involved in seeking reformist groups suggests that he would have chosen the group he felt would most likely recommend the changes he had in mind. The Prentis and Reed commissions only recommended to the Virginia General Assembly the changes they decided were most useful to the Byrd Organization including financial reforms that bolstered Byrd's arguments for the effectiveness of his fiscal policies and consolidation of certain state bureaus. However, as Laurence J. O'Toole explains, "they accepted only about half of the New Yorkers' specific conclusions in this regard. The entire proposal was justified by the committee through reference of the need to make the state more attractive to industry."³⁰ Therefore, the Prentis Commission and the Reed committee softened the recommendations that the New York Bureau made and presented amendments that helped the Byrd Organization to consolidate power.

These recommendations won the support of Governor Byrd. In 1928, the Virginia state constitution underwent profound transformation. Although most of his constituents seemed to accept the changes to the constitution, one group that notably detracted was the anti-Catholic Patriotic Order Sons of America. In a letter from State Vice President U. M. Bland to Virginians, the organization expressed fears over centralizing authority over the school systems. For instance, they were concerned that a Catholic governor or state official could "inculcate in the minds of millions of Virginia children the doctrines and teachings of Roman Catholicism which

³⁰ Laurence J. O'Toole, Harry F. Byrd, Sr. and the New York Bureau of Municipal Research: Lessons from an Ironic Alliance." *Public Administration Review*, 46, no. 2 (1986): 116.

would enable the Roman hierarchy to get complete control of the Commonwealth.”³¹ But, even this criticism did not halt these amendments which surrendered to the Byrd Organization.

But Governor Byrd set his sights beyond constitutional reform. In addition to the reorganization of the state government, Governor Byrd requested that the General Assembly pass an anti-lynching law when he brought his recommendations before the legislature. Although this recommendation was introduced alongside the request to place a statue of Robert E. Lee in the state Capitol building, Byrd’s progressive request deviated his conservative policies. This statue, along with many other statues of Confederates in the Virginian State Capitol Building, was removed in the summer of 2020, one year before Harry Byrd’s own statue was dismantled from Capitol grounds.³² Byrd reminded his Democratic colleagues that this legislation became “one of the strongest antilynching laws in the country.”³³ However, this legislation was merely a bargaining chip with the progressive bloc.

In the same year, Byrd also asked the General Assembly to fund the Shenandoah National Park. The Shenandoah National Park project was a political undertaking that had been and would be of particular interest to Harry Byrd for the rest of his career. Byrd seemed to have a soft spot for the Shenandoah Valley of his Winchester home. Having raised over one million dollars from Virginians for land purchases, Governor Byrd asked the legislature to allocate another million “to make possible the establishment of this park.”³⁴ The Shenandoah National Park project deviated from Byrd’s fiscal agenda. Especially in his early career, Byrd was pragmatic in the policies he supported, and this pragmatism makes it difficult to definitively

³¹ U. M. Bland to Harry Byrd, June 6, 1928, Box 325, Papers of HFB Sr.

³² “Virginia Evicts Confederate Monuments from Its State Capitol,” NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/virginia-evicts-confederate-monuments-its-state-capitol-n1234797>.

³³ Heinemann, Ronald L., *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 80.

³⁴ “Program of Progress Address”, January 16, 1928, Box 397, Papers of HFB Sr.

categorize Byrd as conservative or progressive during his time in the Governor's mansion. In stark contrast to his posture in his later career, Governor Byrd was willing to support progressive legislation when the circumstances advanced his broader political agenda.

The constitutional revisions that could not be pushed through the Virginia General Assembly legislatively were decided by the voters in a referendum in 1928. For increased likelihood of passage of each individual component there would be three separate ballot measures in the referendum. First was the General Resolution which advanced one of the major policy priorities of the Byrd organization: debt reduction. It imposed a debt ceiling on the Virginia state government to prevent the over-reliance on bonds which Byrd felt had been so disastrous in the Virginia government. In addition, it expanded the Virginia Supreme Court, allowing the Organization to appoint new justices to the court.

Governor Byrd's administration strategically approached the public during its the presentation of these constitutional amendments. The 1928 constitutional changes had been split into three basic measures. Preceding these measures, Governor Byrd signed into law a Government Reorganization Bill in 1927. It enacted all changes to the government which it had the authority to accomplish legislatively to gain General Assembly support.³⁵ The rest of the proposed amendments were set for a referendum in 1928. It was decided that each of the proposed amendments would be voted on separately to increase chances of passing.³⁶ The constitutional referendum of 1928 consolidated the power of the Virginia governor, therefore bolstering the power of the Byrd organization so long as Byrd could keep a friendly governor in power.

³⁵ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 117.

³⁶ "1928 Constitution of Virginia Amendments," Virginia Places, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/government/constitution1928.html#two>.

The second measure was one of the most controversial and therefore least likely to pass the General Assembly. The Byrd administration passed tax segregation policy that prevented the state government from imposing property taxes, thereby placing the decision to levy property taxes solely within the purview of local governments. Southern states opposed levying property taxes and tended to hand this unpopular responsibility to the local governments where they could be better kept in check by agricultural interests. Virginia led the way in the shift from property taxes. As a result, Virginia established itself early on as a frontrunner among Southern states resisting governmental norms, and the Byrd Organization tapped into interstate Southern priorities when restructuring the Virginia government. Byrd carried these priorities into the Senate later in his career.

And the third “Short Ballot” amendment was the most impactful for the Byrd Organization’s control over the Virginia state government. This amendment “left the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Attorney General as offices elected in statewide votes, but eliminated statewide elections for Secretary of the Commonwealth, State Treasurer, Auditor of Public Accounts, and Superintendent of Public Instruction.”³⁷ This was extremely important for the Byrd Organization because it placed appointment of these now unelected department heads in the hand of the Governor. Though these changes would not take place until after Governor Byrd’s term expired, the Organization maintained control over the Governor’s Mansion for years to come, and the greater the appointment power of the Governor’s office the more enticing rewards Byrd had for those who operated loyally within the bounds of the Organization.

³⁷ “1928 Constitution of Virginia Amendments,” Virginia Places, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/government/constitution1928.html#two>.

Ultimately, all three of the proposed amendments gained the approval of the voters in the referendum.³⁸ This victory shifted the way that Byrd went about politics, with the new Governor-central state organization in place the Byrd Organization would be able to exert a great deal of power over the state politics in the years to come, regardless of the political position Byrd himself held. Ultimately, the victories over state organization Byrd scored while he was Governor represent Byrd's liberation from concerns of constituent-based needs. Most statewide elections became a rubber-stamp process.

The Byrd Organization, having fully dominated the Virginia Democratic Party, had no reason to fear that Virginians would be able to remove them from power. This seems to be the primary reason for Harry Byrd's shift from a progressive Governor of Virginia to an anachronistic obstructionist senator by the end of his career. The results of the 1928 Virginia state constitutional referendum were not single-handedly responsible for this shift, but they can be seen as the root cause. The Byrd Organization scored another victory when the Democratic candidate for Lieutenant Governor and opponent of the 1928 amendments, James Price conceded the legitimacy of the amendments. When the Virginia Republican party asserted that the Byrd administration had pushed these amendments through without due consideration, Price countered: "The so-called short ballot amendments have been the subject of a great deal of discussion in this campaign and the charge has been frequently made that they were railroaded by a Democratic administration to the detriment of the people of the state. I feel the people of Virginia are entitled to know the facts in the case ... The procedure was entirely regular and in

³⁸ "1928 Constitution of Virginia Amendments." Virginia Places, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/government/constitution1928.html#two>.

conformity with the law.”³⁹ Tellingly, Price did not even mention these charges were levied against the Byrd administration, but rather “a Democratic” administration. Byrd distanced himself from the charges of amending the constitution.

Byrd’s federal career never truly evolved from his state roots. One scholar asserts that Byrd “believed that he was first a Virginian, second a Southerner, and third a United States Senator.”⁴⁰ Byrd’s affinity for regional politics limited his effectiveness in national office. These loyalties shaped Byrd’s time in federal government in profound ways. Although it has been argued that Byrd lacked power in the Senate, it is clear from a study of the Byrd Organization that his power came from his dominance of regional machine politics rather than popular appeal or policy advocacy, unlike many other Senators.

Following the 1928 referendum, further fall-out between the Byrd Organization and the New York Municipal Bureau took place. The Bureau had also undertaken an analysis of local government in Virginia simultaneously with its report on the state government. This report was much harsher than the state report and suggests much more extensive overhauls to the complex and disjointed local government system in Virginia in the late 1920s. It characterized the local government system in Virginia as “grossly political, careless, wasteful, and thoroughly inefficient.”⁴¹ Correspondence regarding the findings of the committee is noticeably absent from Byrd’s papers, and his name is rarely mentioned in connection to the committee following this indictment. Heinemann indicates that Byrd sought to distance himself from the negative results.⁴²

³⁹ “Defends Passage of the Short Ballot Amendment,” *Smithfield Times* (Smithfield, VA), 10 October 1929, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive,” <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=TSMT19291010&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-1928+amendments+passed----->.

⁴⁰ Chitose Sato, “Senator Harry F. Byrd and the New Deal Reform Policy in Virginia, 1933-1938” (PhD diss., The College of William and Mary, 1991), <http://www.proquest.com/docview/1955346263?pq-origsite=primo>.

⁴¹ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 80. and O’Toole, “Harry F. Byrd, Sr. and the New York Bureau of Municipal Research,” 114.

⁴² Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 80.

Byrd alleged his hands were tied by the state constitution while the local governments were free to reorganize. Byrd “demonstrated,” as Heinemann put it, “once again the priority of politics over economy and efficiency; Byrd could not afford to alienate the local officials who were such an important cog in his machine by reducing their autonomy, regardless of their incompetence.”⁴³ By dodging the Bureau’s strong recommendation to reorganize local governments, Byrd signaled the Byrd Organization’s shift away from progressive reform-minded organization in Virginia which depended on reform-consolidated power for the Organization. O’Toole’s assertion that “The bosses were not unanimously or unequivocally opposed to progressive ideas” rings true, because this progressivism could be used to consolidate and streamline their power in “reforms.” The Byrd Organization leaders’ support for these ideas crumbled when progressive ideas extended beyond this purpose.⁴⁴

In 1928, Governor Byrd also turned his sights toward national politics, namely the presidential election between Governor Al Smith of New York and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover. As expected, Byrd endorsed Smith as the nominee of the national Democratic party and made multiple speeches to Virginia voters during which he supported Smith in the run up to November. However, divisions over Al Smith’s Catholicism and Prohibition caused intraparty struggles on both sides. In a speech to Virginian voters that aired on the radio, Byrd attempted to discourage Virginians from letting their positions on Prohibition entice them to waver in their support of the Democratic party.⁴⁵ He quoted the words of Congressman Leonidas Dyer to inspire fear among Virginian voters:

On November 6th that great engineer-politician, Hoover with the votes of prohibitionists and those swayed because of the religious question in the South will drive such a thick wedge through the heart of the solid South and their white supremacy slogan that it will

⁴³ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 81.

⁴⁴ O’Toole Jr, “Harry F. Byrd, Sr. and the New York Bureau of Municipal Research,” 121.

⁴⁵ “The Real Issue in the Campaign” Speech - Presidential Campaign, 1928, Box 357, Papers of HFB Sr.

blow up their unconstitutional program. . . . After the solid South has been blown to pieces by the Engineer Hoover, our next President, that will be the finish of the nullificationists of the South, who have for sixty years violated and prevented the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Then Congress will enact enforcement laws that will give millions of Negroes their constitutional rights as citizens and place them on an equality with all other races.⁴⁶

Two factors explain Byrd's decision to cite Dyer in support of Al Smith. First, the reference to the 'solid South.' At a time when the Democratic party had dominated Southern politics for decades, Dyer's speech instigated real fears that regional differences with the national party would see the South slip away from Democratic control. Byrd's reference to this speech encouraged voters to overcome issues they may have had with Al Smith's candidacy in the name of party loyalty. Secondly, the reference to the enforcement of the 14th and 15th Amendments stoked white supremacist fears and scared voters into choosing Smith despite his Catholicism. Ironically, it was not long before the very issue of the equal rights African Americans drove a wedge between Southern Democrats and the national party. Byrd's subsequent commentary explains his views on the role of party politics in the South:

Heretofore when defeated the shattered lines of the Democratic soldiery have been able to rebuild on the solid front preserved by the Southern States. Break that front and there will be nothing left on which to rebuild. Worse even, let the national ticket be defeated only by the failure to command the support of the solid South and the resentment of the main Democratic army will destroy the unity that is essential to future effectiveness of the party.⁴⁷

Byrd embraced the "solid South" and saw the Democratic party deeply entwined with Southern values. Describing the South as a stronghold for the Democratic party, he appeals to the historical tradition of Southern support for the Democratic party. He described the South as the tripping point for Democratic national party unity. In this speech, he even cited fear of

⁴⁶ "The Real Issue in the Campaign" Speech - Presidential Campaign, 1928. Box 357, Papers of HFB Sr.

⁴⁷ "The Real Issue in the Campaign" Speech - Presidential Campaign, 1928. Box 357, Papers of HFB Sr.

resentment and retribution from the national party. Though his tone changed significantly over the course of his career regarding the need for Southern Democrats to simply swallow their pride and support the national party, he never openly sided with the Republican party. Though his relationship with the national Democratic party deteriorated significantly after he entered national politics, one thing remained true throughout his career: for Byrd, Democratic politics were the primary foundation of South.

Subject to the one-term limit imposed on Governors in Virginia, Byrd left the Governor's Mansion in January of 1930 and was succeeded by John Garland Pollard, an established Virginian politician and friend of the organization. In reflecting on the growth and progress his administration brought to Virginia, Byrd maintained: "Devastated as we were in the war between the states Virginia is today the richest in net wealth from Texas to Pennsylvania. Since 1870 our wealth has increased more than fourteenfold, while Massachusetts, who never felt the tread of an unfriendly foot, increased eightfold and Pennsylvania ninefold."⁴⁸ This remark reveals two key aspects of Byrd's ideology. First, it is a return to what historian Goldfield describes as the "still fighting the Civil War mentality." Byrd not only regarded "Reconstruction as a courageous battle against the despoilers of [Old South Civilization and American constitutional principles]—blacks and Yankees alike—that concluded in triumph or Redemption," but he understood his term as governor as "Redemption" from Radical Republicans.⁴⁹ (Radical Republicans took charge in Virginia during the Reconstruction period and were despised by Democrats.) Second, this speech highlights that Byrd viewed the progress of his administration in terms of wealth created rather

⁴⁸ "Industrial Advancement," *Smithfield Times* (Smithfield, VA), 5 June 1930, <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=TSMT19300605.1.5&srpos=3&e=-1929---1930--en-20--1--txt-txIN-harry+byrd+governor+retirement----->

⁴⁹ David R. Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 4.

than specific voter-oriented programs. Byrd had given Virginian voters some progressive policies, such as the establishment of the Shenandoah National Park, the anti-lynching law of 1929, and increased funding to the Virginia public school system. However, Byrd's power in the state grew and his reliance on the Organization's popularity within the Virginia Democratic party waned, he would turn his sights away from progressive reform.⁵⁰ In Senate, Byrd focused on maintaining electoral power in Virginia.

Byrd's as a Senator

After he stepped away from the governor's office, Harry Byrd took a break during his fifty-year political career. Between 1930 until 1933, he returned to his family home Rosemont and oversaw the Byrd orchard in Berryville along with the family-owned newspapers. During this time, he had a favorite-son nomination thrust on him, briefly putting him at odds with Franklin Roosevelt at the 1932 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Before the hotly contested primaries in which party politicians had to appeal to the party members of each state to secure support at the convention, many states simply appointed delegations to the convention via the state's party committee. In many cases these delegations went into the convention officially supporting a prominent state politician who had not officially declared presidential ambitions. Although favorite-son nominations were often ceremonial ways of recognizing the leadership of prominent state politicians and more attributed to delegate control at the convention than actual presidential aspirations, this suggests that Byrd Organization maintained control over Virginian politics even when Byrd was not holding any elected office. In acknowledging the favorite-son nomination Byrd said on Independence Day, 1932: "I deeply appreciate the partiality shown me by the Virginia people and the loyalty of the Virginia delegation. I endeavored to so use this

⁵⁰ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 80.

confidence reposed in me as to promote our party success.” He declared, “The Virginia delegation at Chicago had mainly at heart the unity of the party.”⁵¹

In 1933, when Claude Swanson resigned his seat in the Senate to become President Franklin Roosevelt’s Naval Secretary, Governor John Pollard appointed Byrd to fill his seat. Byrd had been considering a run against Swanson in the 1934 primary, so it is likely that Swanson began looking for positions outside the Senate to avoid going up against the Byrd Organization. Thus began Byrd’s thirty years in the United States Senate.

Because Swanson’s seat was up for reelection in 1934, Byrd had to run in a special election in 1933 to remain the incumbent in the 1934. Despite fears of unrest within the state Democratic party, the Byrd Organization fared well in the 1933-1934 elections. Initially his relationship with President Roosevelt was cordial and concentrated on the United States’ economic recovery at the height of the Great Depression. However, the conservative Virginian and the liberal president soon confronted stark differences over proposed economic solutions and the underlying causes of the Great Depression.

Senator Byrd was no stranger to economic hardships having passed the days of his youth in rural turn-of-the-century Virginia. He blamed debt accrued by the Virginia state government for the economic situation in the state. Byrd felt that the anti-debt and reorganization policies he put in place as a governor brought industry and economic prosperity back to Virginia. These policies were at odds with the progressive government-expansionary New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration.

Following Harry Byrd’s appointment to the Senate, the Byrd Organization dominated in Virginia. Historian Larry Sabato maintains, “politics in the Old Dominion seemed so predictable

⁵¹ “Organization, Presidential Campaign”, 1932 July 4, Box 397, Papers of HFB Sr.

[in the period from 1933 to 1946] that one wonders how the voters manages to stay awake.”⁵² President Roosevelt attempted to destabilize the Byrd Organization’s dominance in Virginia. During his 1938 “purge” of conservative Democrats, Roosevelt supported Organization-outsider Governor James Price and nominated Floyd Roberts, a liberal Democrat, as a federal judge in Virginia. Ultimately, however, the Byrd Organization averted this federally supported “uprising” of liberal Democrats through the election of Organization boss Colgate Darden as Governor in 1941.⁵³ Byrd felt, like many Southern Democrats, he could support Roosevelt’s initial New Deal in 1932. Because Southern states depended on the New Deal’s economic aid, they were supportive of Roosevelt’s initial proposals. However, as New Deal programs began to address African Americans’ needs in the South as well, they attacked the New Deal for being too expensive. They stressed liberal Democrats’ break with the national party deflecting from their own departure. More immediately, the Organization and Virginian Senators Glass and Byrd were able to capitalize on senatorial resentment over the 1938 purges to resoundingly defeat the Roberts nomination in 1939.⁵⁴

During Byrd’s senate term, he reached consensus with President Roosevelt over government reorganization. Having had his successful experience reorganizing the Virginia state government, Byrd felt the same principles of government reorganization should hold true for the federal government. Roosevelt, however, sought reorganization by governmental expansion rather than reduction.⁵⁵ In July of 1935, the *Suffolk News-Herald* wrote: “How such a fight be avoided with Virginia’s senators openly opposing many New Deal measures is not clear at the

⁵² Larry Sabato, *The Democratic Party Primary in Virginia : Tantamount to Election No Longer* (Charlottesville: University of University Press of Virginia, 1977), 54, <http://archive.org/details/democraticpartyp00saba>. and A. Cash Koeniger, “The New Deal and the States: Roosevelt Versus the Byrd Organization in Virginia,” *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 4 (1982): 877, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1900773>.

⁵³ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 267.

⁵⁴ Koeniger, “The New Deal and the States,” 889-890.

⁵⁵ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 179.

moment. The only way out for the organization, it appears, is to endorse the Roosevelt administration and acquiesce to Roosevelt's renomination. Should Senators Byrd and Glass be unwilling to face Virginia with an endorsement of the President after opposing his administration, a fight for control of the state is inevitable."⁵⁶ Byrd and the Roosevelt administration's disagreement came to a particular head when Roosevelt submitted his proposed government reorganization plan and said "'Harry, take it or leave it.' Byrd replied, 'Mr. President, I will have to leave it.'" According to historian Ronald Heinemann, Byrd objected to what he called "mere regrouping" and "predicted that the creation of new departments of social welfare spending would be the route to perpetual relief spending."⁵⁷

Throughout the Roosevelt administration Byrd, like many conservative Democrats, would have to balance the fine line between opposing his domestic economic expansion and supporting Roosevelt's interventionist stance on international issues. When the United States was ultimately thrust into the World War Two, Senator Byrd continued to support American military efforts all-the-while criticizing the defense budget. Early in the war preparation process, Byrd even threatened to "reveal military secrets so that the American people would know the extent of the [funding] dilemma." This threat came against the urging of almost all of those in his inner circle, such as administrative assistant Peachy Menefree and editor of the Richmond *News Leader* Douglas Freeman.⁵⁸

The war provided a temporary hiatus to the growing divide between the conservative and liberal factions of the Democratic party. Ronald Heinemann explains, "Although court packing

⁵⁶ "Herald 1936 to Best 1928 for Party Struggle," *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA), 30 July 1935, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive," <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19350730.1.2&srpos=7&e=---en-20--1--txt-txIN-byrd+roosevelt----->.

⁵⁷ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 180.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

and purges weakened the South's affection for the president, the war produced a reconciliation with southern congressmen, who were among FDR's strongest supporters on intervention and mobilization."⁵⁹ Roosevelt surrendered from the purge of 1938 and retained conservative Democrats, a powerful bloc within the party. According to Heinemann, "With war approaching in Europe and national elections pending in 1940 he would not further damage the prestige of his administration on patronage fights he could not win. The purge was over."⁶⁰ This truce, along with bolstered wartime patriotism, would mean relative peace between the Byrd faction and the national Democratic party throughout most of the Second World War. However, this unification was by no means permanent. Upon Vice President Harry Truman's assumption of the presidency at the close of the war, the divisions within the Democratic party deepened.

"So-called Civil Rights"

In February of 1948, Harry Byrd quoted Thomas Jefferson in a speech to 1,200 Democrats in Richmond. He declared: "The law of self-preservation overrules the law of obligation to others."⁶¹ This quote represents Byrd's philosophical against civil rights. Using the name of a Founding Father to justify his position gave Byrd's philosophy the veneer of civic respectability. Even though Jefferson's original context encouraged the use of executive authority in times of crisis, Byrd used this quote to attack the Truman administration's promotion of civil rights through the Federal Employment Practices Commission.⁶² President Harry Truman represented

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁶⁰ Koeniger, "The New Deal and the States," 891.

⁶¹ "Sen. Byrd Attacks 'Rights' Program," *Arlington Daily* (Arlington, VA), 20 February 1948, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive, <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=TAD19480220.1.1&srpos=3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-byrd+truman+1948----->.

⁶² "Thomas Jefferson to John B. Colvin," *The Founders' Constitution*, The University of Chicago Press, Volume 4, Article 2, Section 3, Document 8, http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a2_3s8.html

the liberal progressive Democrat that the Byrd Organization had fought to remove in Virginia for the past two decades. Truman's ascension to the presidency only accelerated the rate at which conservative Southern Democrats broke ranks with the national Democratic party. Senator Byrd's personal distaste for the policies of the Truman administration became evident in four areas: civil rights, the Truman doctrine, labor movements, and fiscal policy.

Following the Allied victory of the Second World War, Senator Byrd set his sights on the greatest threat to American global supremacy: the Soviet Union. Byrd, a lifelong capitalist, abhorred everything Communism stood for and made clear early into the postwar years that he felt the United States should bolster its military to maintain strength against Soviet Russia. This was one of the few areas where Senator Byrd and President Truman agreed.

The rift between Senator Byrd and President Truman saw its deepest discord on the issue of foreign aid and domestic expenditures. This split represented an ideological difference about how the United States should wield its postwar powers, and to whom the American government held obligations. Senator Byrd opposed American investment in rebuilding the economies of Europe and felt that the postwar years were the time for the United States to get its own house in order fiscally. As Heinemann writes, "Byrd had come to believe that the greatest danger to the country's security came not through military power but through fiscal insolvency; if the Russians were to beat the United States it would be through a financial collapse. Moreover, he had little confidence that the Europeans could succeed, fearing that the factories rebuilt with American money would call into the hands of the Russians."⁶³

Byrd enraged anti-Byrd factions in Virginia with this position as well. His 1952 primary opponent Francis Pickens Miller attacked him for opposing almost all Democratic legislation

⁶³ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 250.

during the Truman administration. Miller's campaign surrogate Thomas Michie claimed: "Senator Byrd, with all his ability, I do not believe to be capable of comprehending in any manner the spirit and needs of the day we live in. His votes on foreign policy alone have abundantly justified that belief."⁶⁴ Byrd was not mistaken in identifying this as a real threat to political stability. However, it remains unclear whether the fiscal policies Byrd clung to could have provided the United States the necessary credit with which to compete with Russia. Byrd's fiscal conservatism established a precedent of skepticism for non-military, non-essential expenditures, especially with regards to foreign aid. Though conservative definitions of essential expenditures evolved during and after Byrd's time in the Senate, Southern conservatism rarely allowed foreign aid considerations to outweigh debt and deficit concerns.

Byrd often walked a fine line between his fiscal conservatism and support for military preparedness. He served on a committee to help establish the Atomic Energy Commission and supported the exploration and testing of nuclear technology. However, he was worried about the growing price tag of the American military. He feared that, to a large degree, the enormous sums the United States government had spent to upkeep the military in the Second World War would, much like the "perpetual relief spending" of the New Deal in the Depression, become permanent addition to the U.S. federal budget.

In a 1950 in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Byrd insisted on limiting spending. He wrote "Our fiscal crisis at home is just as serious as our military crisis abroad. We can't meet the military crisis without a preservation of free-enterprise, mass-production system, and we cannot preserve this system in fiscal insolvency... Have we the statesmanship to see the whole picture?"

⁶⁴ "Byrd Denies Opposing all Demo Legislation," *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA) 3 July 1952, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive," <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19520703.1.1&srpos=6&e=---en-20--1--txt-txIN-byrd+truman+foreign+aid----->.

To date, the President has failed in this respect to meet his responsibility in the crisis which confronts our nation.”⁶⁵ Such a public attack on President Truman represented a notable low point in the relationship Byrd had with the Truman administration. The disagreements between Senator Byrd and Truman were not merely short-lived spats, they were indicative of a broader split between conservative and liberal Democrats during Truman’s time in office.

In addition to his fiscal concerns for the United States, Byrd disagreed with Truman on organized labor movements. During the Truman and early Eisenhower years, he tried to curb the impact of union power. Senator Byrd was a key figure in drafting the Taft-Hartley Labor Act that added restrictions on labor unions and its anti-communist leanings. Senator Byrd held bitter sentiment towards John L. Lewis, then president of the CIO and leader of the United Mine Workers of America. In his 1950 speech “America’s March Toward Socialism,” Byrd argued: “We are now facing a serious crisis in the production of coal. John L. Lewis has been playing with the American people like a cat plays with a mouse. He turns on coal one day and turns it off the next day but every evening at sundown we have less coal than we did at sunrise. He wants to get the country into such a point that we must submit to his demands or great distress and suffering, and actual death will come to many of our citizens.”⁶⁶ In this speech Byrd pandered to the fears of conservatives about government and union control, and implied malevolent intent among Lewis and the union members. Byrd’s reference to “actual death” shows just how much he wanted his audience to believe that Lewis had the power to dramatically alter their way of life, and that the right to organize was dangerous because it could result in national economic distress.

⁶⁵ “Editorial from the Wall Street Journal”, Box 370, Papers of HFB Sr.

⁶⁶ “America’s March Towards Socialism”, pg. 5, Box 370, Papers of HFB Sr.

One of the most significant differences between Byrd and the Truman administration emerged over the issue of race and the civil rights plank of the Democratic party platform. Southern senators rallied behind Byrd's office early in 1948 to form a consensus of obstruction with regards to all civil rights legislation President Truman might propose.⁶⁷ Harry Byrd, along with many other Democrats or "Dixiecrats" opposed President Truman's 1948 reelection bid.⁶⁸ President Truman faced an uphill battle. According to Heinemann, "From the beginning Byrd believed that Truman would drop out in the face of almost certain defeat. Representing Governor Tuck at a conference of Dixie Governors he spoke of a potential schism at the national convention, implying that Truman could not win without southern support. Enthusiastically he encouraged friends in the region to pledge their opposition to the President."⁶⁹

However, much to the surprise of Byrd, his Southern voters and the nation, Truman won re-election in 1948, and the conservative white Southern Democrats failed to gain control of their part. The liberal faction had retained its New Deal-era popularity. Headed into the second term of the Truman administration, Harry Byrd continued to buck against Truman's Fair Deal beating back civil rights protections, healthcare, education, and infrastructure spending.⁷⁰ This is particularly evident when he admonished the Federal Employment Protection Commission. Byrd stated: "The President of the United States had accepted and endorsed the conclusion of the committee known as the president's committee on civil rights. ...it is proposed to establish another costly, powerful, and inquisitorial bureau of the federal government to send the strong

⁶⁷ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 259.

⁶⁸ J. Harvie Wilkinson, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968), 135.

⁶⁹ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 259.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 291-92.

arm of the national government into daily transactions of virtually every man's private business; to tell employers who to hire, who to fire, and who to promote."⁷¹

The reelection of Harry Truman signaled a shift towards a more liberal national Democratic party following the Dixiecrat showdown. Wilkinson maintains, "The New Deal years and Truman's civil rights program reversed the old Democratic notions of white supremacy, and the national Democratic party began more and more to woo urban voting blocs outside the South. ... Virginia political parties did not keep pace with these national shifts but generally stood pat along Civil War lines."⁷² Byrd began to adopt the obstructionist role that defined the rest of his career as well as the modern Republican Party. Byrd was outspoken against Truman's candidacy in 1952 and he was influential in convincing Senator Richard Russell to seek the Democratic party's nomination in Truman's place.⁷³ Though Adlai Stevenson became the Democratic party's nominee, Senator Byrd's obstructionism against civil rights did not cease after Truman left office.

Byrd became the subject of pressure to officially break ranks with the Democratic party and endorse Dwight Eisenhower in the general election. Mills F. Neal, Chairman of the Virginia Democrats for Eisenhower encouraged his supporters to bombard Byrd with telegrams encouraging him to "put loyalty to his principles above all else." Simultaneously, frequent Byrd Organization opponent Francis Miller labeled Eisenhower "a Dixiecrat in the South and a

⁷¹ "Sen. Byrd Attacks 'Rights' Program," *Arlington Daily* (Arlington, VA), 20 February 1948, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive, <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=TAD19480220.1.1&srpos=3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-byrd+truman+1948----->.

⁷² Wilkinson, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966*. 210.

⁷³ "Senator Byrd Pays Fee for July Primary: Will Seek Election to Fourth Term," *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA), 10 April 1952, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive," <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19520410.1.1&srpos=12&e=--1948---1953--en-20--1--txt-txIN-truman+fair+deal+byrd----->.

reactionary isolationist in the North.”⁷⁴ This the rhetoric and results of the 1952 presidential election show Byrd was subject to the combined models of Democratic push and Republican pull laid out by Quentin, Morris, and Hood. While Eisenhower’s surrogates pressured Byrd for an endorsement, Miller cited his refusal to endorse Eisenhower calling him Dixiecrat and isolationist which could just as easily have applied to Byrd.

Byrd and the Eisenhower Years

Senator Byrd’s obstructionism against civil rights did not cease after Truman left office. The election of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 brought a more conservative executive to the White House, and Byrd had a far better personal relationship with the general. President Dwight Eisenhower enjoyed a warmer reception from Byrd than most Republicans, and certainly had a better relationship with him than Truman did. However, the civil rights issue marred their relationship during his time in office court rulings.

In response to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Byrd joined Senators Richard Russell of Georgia and Strom Thurmond of South Carolina in drafting the “Declaration of Constitutional Principles.” The document asserted that ninety years of harmony had existed in American race relations until the Brown ruling which will upset “amicable relations” between black and white Americans.⁷⁵ The Southern Manifesto’s disregard for the rights of African Americans and false claims about the tranquility of racial relations in the South after the end of the Civil War revealed Byrd’s (and the co-signers’) interpretation of the past. By drafting and

⁷⁴ “Efforts Underway to Have Byrd Endorse Eisenhower or Stevenson,” *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA), 16 October 1952, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive,
<https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19521016.1.1&srpos=3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-byrd+dixiecrat----->

⁷⁵ “Declaration of Constitutional Principles”, March 12, 1956, Box 356, Papers of HFB Sr.

signing the Southern Manifesto, Byrd signaled a lack of accountability to and disregard for the needs of his Black Virginian constituents. The Byrd Organization was kept in power on a foundation of white supremacist beliefs. Attempts to destabilize the racial hierarchy in Virginia undermined the power of the Byrd Organization and therefore Byrd himself. Just as Byrd could not leave the Democratic party and expect to maintain such absolute control of Virginia, the Byrd Organization relied on white supremacy to maintain its structure.

During President Eisenhower's authorized intervention during the Little Rock integration crisis and federalization of the Arkansas National Guard, Byrd opposed the federalization. His role in drafting the Southern Manifesto and support for the massive resistance movement against the desegregation of the Virginia public schools demonstrated his departure from the progressive elements in the Democratic Party.

When the Democratic party embraced civil rights on the national level and created opportunities for African Americans during the 1930s, Byrd continued to clamp down on Black disenfranchisement in Virginia. Byrd likely feared that Black Virginians would bolster the Anti-Byrd Organization forces in Virginia as they helped move the party leftward. Not only could this wry the party out of the hands of the Byrd Organization, but especially if these factions allied with the Republicans in Virginia's general elections, Byrd feared that they could push many of the Old-Guard Organization bosses out of office.

At the same time Senator Byrd made his voice heard in the national debate on civil rights in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In what had been termed the "Massive Resistance," Virginian school boards refused to comply with the Brown ruling the Court handed down with the full backing of the Byrd Organization and the Virginian state government. Much has been written about this period in Virginia's history, in fact, historians have labeled Byrd an

instigator—one of the most widely documented (and criticized) chapters in Byrd’s political career. In this chapter of Byrd’s career, he revealed himself to be both a product of his times and a catalyst in shaping postwar race relations. The expansion of racial equality in Virginia would have upset the entire Byrd Organization’s electoral foundation which had a vested interests in seeing African American excluded from the ballot box. Like many parts of the Byrd Organization, he would use the tactics of civic exclusion inherited from previous generations alongside new attempts to maintain white political supremacy. At a time of shifting racial demographics that began to align African American interests with those of the national Democratic party, Byrd doubled down on his exclusionary policies because he was not willing to risk shifting the foundation of his power in Virginia.

Byrd, like many white Southern conservatives, embraced political tactics. According to Hatch, the “Massive Resistance fight that would forever change the way American political debate was conducted. Byrd invented the tag of the ‘Warren Court.’ It was a shrewd political gambit, for it seemed to depreciate the Supreme Court from a respected institution to the personal instrument of a single man. Right-wing conservatives took up the phrase and Byrd himself, really appeared to blame Warren for what he considered malpractice of the Court.”⁷⁶ Senator Byrd’s rejection of the Supreme Court decision had lasting effects: it signaled the politicizing of the Court and devalued the independent judiciary. In this way, Byrd set a precedent for conservative politicians that rejected rulings they opposed as political judicial overreach. The Byrd Organization was a regional powerhouse bitterly and hopelessly pushing against civil rights justice and popular American sentiment to preserve a dying tradition. It was clear that Organization Virginians saw the *Brown* ruling as another federal mandate that Virginia

⁷⁶ Alden Hatch, *The Byrds of Virginia*. 500.

had to nullify. When President Eisenhower used federal force in Little Rock, Arkansas to enforce the Supreme Court's decision in 1957, Senator Byrd was appalled. He labeled the decision "one of the most dangerous things that has ever been done in our history."⁷⁷

As he had done before, Byrd framed this as a struggle between the constitutionally justified Southerners and an imposing, looming federal government. At the State Democratic Convention at Virginia Beach in 1960 Byrd said: "With our backs to the wall, the Southerners withstood the power of the federal government, the political pressure of those states appealing to the Negro vote, and the propaganda of the facilities available to the NAACP."⁷⁸ In his recounting of massive resistance to the Virginia State Democratic party, he touted victory in the face of growing calls for more civil rights legislation.

Throughout Byrd's career in the Senate, he opposed civil rights campaigns. In fact, in the final decade of Byrd's career, he refused to acknowledge civil rights legislation by name, calling it "So-Called Civil Rights." He used this rhetoric with many pieces of legislation he rejected, branding them 'so-called x' to avoid conceding even the basic purpose of the legislation. He would use this same tactic with the "So-Called Voting Rights" Act of 1964 as well as with "So-Called Medicare."⁷⁹ In 1960, when debating "So-Called Civil Rights" legislation in 1960, he declared: "To proclaim by Federal law that no employer can express himself anywhere in speech or print in dislike of association with Japanese without making himself liable to the charge that he has refused to employ Japanese is an outrageous invasion of personal right to which other citizens are not subjected." In this speech, Byrd supported the "personal rights" of established employers to speak and write as they wished over the civil rights of economic security for racial

⁷⁷ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*. 341.

⁷⁸ "Speech at State Democratic Convention", Virginia Beach, Virginia, May 21, 1960, Box 387, Papers of HFB Sr.

⁷⁹ Atwood, "'Dear Harry,' 'My Dear Jack,'" 296; "So-Called Medicare," HFB Papers Box 415.

minorities in the United States. This moment demonstrates where his definitions of liberty were at odds with the notions of civic equality of the liberal wing of the Democratic party.

He framed the employers as the true victims of the Civil Rights Act. He explained: “The survivors of Dachau and Buchenwald are not expected to maintain equanimity and objectivity regarding their Nazi oppressors. No one regards it as unwarranted for Jews to dislike association with Nazified Germans or with other racial or religious groups that have persecuted them. . . . But, here we have a law proposed which would attempt to deny millions of employers and employees any freedom to speak or act on the basis of their religious convictions or deep-rooted preferences for associating or not associating with certain classifications of people.”⁸⁰ The notion of victimhood Byrd places on American employers attempted to reverse the narrative of racial discrimination in the workplace by presenting employers as forced by a burdensome and restrictive act to hire truly deplorable individuals. Byrd’s particular reference to Jewish relations with Nazis not only victimized employers by comparing this act to the abuses of the Holocaust, but also implied that the average Japanese American was anti-American and part of the Japanese Empire. This was obviously untrue and ignored the actual infringements Japanese Americans saw on their rights, particularly those who were forced into internment camps during the Second World War.

In the final analysis, Harry Byrd, like so many of his Southern colleagues actively sought to maintain power against constituents who had been struggling under what they perceived as the “yoke of oppression.” Many of these Southern legislators, like Byrd, had constructed the systems of oppression that the national Democratic party was attempting to undo. His contemporaries praised Byrd for his integrity and character as a public servant. When writing to Byrd in 1958

⁸⁰ “‘So-Called Civil Rights’ Senate Remarks”, Box 387, Papers of HFB Sr.

Associate Justice Carlton Mobley of the Georgia State Supreme Court says “You have rendered great service to your state and to the nation, and we the people of the South are particularly proud of you and grateful for the contribution you have made during your long tenure in the Senate.”⁸¹

“That State of Twilight”: Harry Byrd’s Fiscal Reactionary Nature

Long before his ardent support of states’ rights in the late 1940s and 1950s, Senator Byrd sought to limit the federal power by imposing strict financial constraints on the budget. In this regard Byrd was both ahead of his time and behind his time; he had carried his anachronistic views from state government into the federal government. Senator Byrd also broke away from the Truman administration on fiscal policy. This split reveals two key aspects of his political values that are also vital to understanding his continued break from the national Democratic party. In the wake of World War Two, Byrd was very reluctant to adapt the fiscal policies he used to gain power in Virginia. In refusing to let go of the fiscal accomplishments he made two decades earlier in Virginia, Byrd showed that he never truly made the necessary shift from regional to national legislator. Although he never acquired the dominance in national politics that he did in Virginian state politics, Byrd was able to inject his fiscal views into the national debate and exert authority over anti-federal debt policies during his time in office.

Though Byrd enjoyed a national reputation, his views on race and fiscal issues left him behind other Senators. While fiscal viewpoints made him popular in Virginia, they did not capture the national imagination. Debt abhorrence worked in Virginia because of the economic burden Civil War debt had placed on Byrd’s father’s generation but coming out of the

⁸¹ Carlton Mobley to Harry Byrd, February 27, 1958, Box 325, Papers of HFB Sr.

Depression the economic woes of the nation had little to do with government debt and stemmed from global market crashes that were not as easy to navigate for the government.⁸²

Secondly, Byrd's fiscal conservatism reflected the rift within the Democratic party which did not only polarize Northern and Southern politicians on civil rights issues. In addition, some conservative Democrats split with liberals over a far deeper perception of the purpose and power of the government. Senator Byrd broke with the fiscal policies of the Truman administration early on. He struggled to strike a balance between maintaining American military strength and managing federal spending. Byrd believed that Truman's Fair Deal expansion of welfare programs increased debt. Byrd and Truman agreed to raising taxes but split after the contentious 1948 election that ushered in a rift between Truman and the Dixiecrats.

It was during this election that Byrd's unique stance as a Southern Democrat at a time of great demographic transition began. Whereas many other Dixiecrats felt that the one-party system could no longer serve the needs of both the liberal and conservative Democrats, Byrd never fully stepped away from the Democratic party. Byrd remained nominally loyal to the Democratic party all the while drifting from them ideologically. Byrd's hesitancy to embrace a third-party system is reflective of the reasons the Dixiecrats ultimately failed. Historian Kari Fredrickson explains, "white voters rejected Dixiecrat independence because it did not assure effective protection against civil rights legislation, not because they were no longer aroused by the politics of race."⁸³ Byrd never left the Democratic party because doing so would have jeopardized his ability to enact segregationist policies in Virginia and across the nation. He never accepted the liberalization of the Democratic party.

⁸² Alden Hatch, *The Byrds of Virginia*.

⁸³ Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2003), 9.

Byrd hoped that a more conservative Democrat might run instead of Truman. While Byrd officially stayed above the fray by refusing to endorse any candidate, Governor William Tuck, a Byrd organization Democrat would encourage Senator Strom Thurmond to run as an independent.⁸⁴ In addition, the Virginia state legislature passed so-called “Anti-Truman” laws which changed the ballot from presenting the name of the presidential candidates to showing the names of the electors that would vote for the president. It was against party rules for a Democrat to encourage their constituents to vote against the party’s nominee. This bill provided a loophole for Byrd’s anti-Truman Democrats in Virginia to exploit which allowed them to encourage their constituents to vote for anti-Truman electors, which was not technically encouraging them to vote against Truman himself. Byrd inserted Governor Tuck’s remarks on these amendments into the congressional record. Heinemann assumes that Byrd originated the idea of this legislation, but beyond his obvious personal interest in these bills there is minimal evidence for his direct involvement. It is certainly not impossible to imagine that Byrd devised the idea and allowed Governor Tuck to assume credit out of political convenience. Regardless of where the idea originated, it is clear that the Byrd Organization was still actively promoting Harry Byrd’s interests in state and national politics.⁸⁵

After gaining a very unexpected mandate from American voters in 1948, President Truman would set his sights on carrying on progressive policies by setting out for a “Repeal of the Taft-Hartley law and new labor legislation, the farm program, inflation controls, funds to continue the Marshall plan and the Civil Rights program, housing, aid to education, and bills to

⁸⁴ James R. Sweeney, “Byrd and the Anti-Byrd The Struggle for Political Supremacy in Virginia 1945-1954” (Notre Dame, Indiana, The Univeristy of Notre Dame, 1979), 97.

⁸⁵ Heinemann, Ronald L., *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 257.

end senate filibusters.”⁸⁶ But, his bid to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act ultimately failed. Having alienated conservative Southern Democratic legislators, Truman was not able to cobble together enough liberal votes to end the restrictions on unions.

This failed effort set the tone for the fiscal battles of the rest of Truman’s time in office. According to Heinemann, “Byrd frustrated the president on several other issues in 1949. Offering his first ‘Byrd’s-eye’ view of the government’s fiscal situation, he predicted an \$11 billion deficit over the next three years ... this despite the fact that Truman had presented to Congress a balanced budget dependent upon a tax increase. ... Byrd’s solution was spending cut.”⁸⁷ Perhaps due to the negative relationship that already emerged between the men, the government’s budget had grown to such a size that there were few cuts Truman could have satisfied Byrd.

As Byrd continued to depart from liberal Democrats and presidential administrations for the remainder of his career in Senate, he gave speeches at his annual spring picnics called the “Byrd’s-eye” during which he focused on the budget and fiscal matters. An invitation to the spring picnic signified that an individual was on good terms with Senator Byrd and although all presidents after him would, President Truman did not receive invitations to the picnics.

⁸⁶ “Taft-Hartley Law Due to be Replaced,” *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, Virginia), 5 January 1949, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive, <https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19490105.1.1&srpos=7&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-taft%252Dhartley+repeal----->

⁸⁷ Heinemann, Ronald L., *Harry Byrd of Virginia*. 292-293.

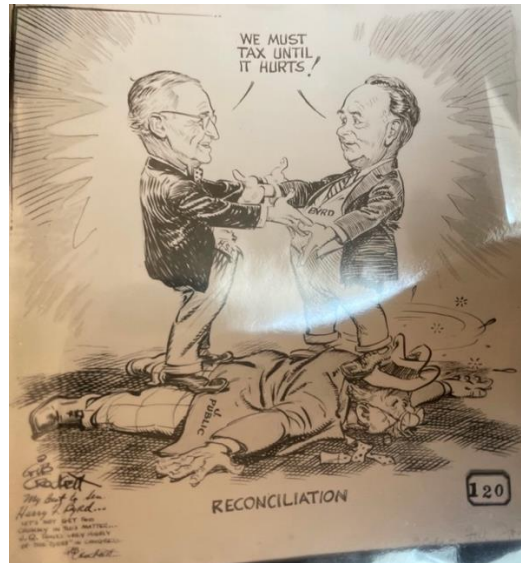


Figure 2: Reconciliation⁸⁸

There was much that Truman and Byrd bitterly disagreed on, fiscally and otherwise. However, during Truman’s second term, they agreed on raising taxes. Figure 2 shows a cartoon titled “Reconciliation” which Byrd kept in his files. It shows how he and Truman are trampling the public while embracing over taxation. In the cartoon, Byrd and Truman are literally crushing “J. Public,” a common personification of the American people, in their embrace over taxation. The cartoon portrays Truman and Byrd as spenders of American people’s money regardless of the financial burden on the taxpayer or the wishes of the public. In December of 1950, Byrd wrote to Truman, laying out his recommendations for the budget: “We have already imposed one tax increase of \$4.5 billion. The second increase, \$3.5 billion in the form of an excess profits levy is being enacted now. ... These suggestions should be regarded as the point from which future reductions should be considered. Even when they are substantially exceeded a third tax increase will be an immediate prospect.”⁸⁹ Byrd’s correspondence with the president detailed

⁸⁸ Cartoon Collection, Photographs, and Awards, Box H, Papers of HFB Sr.

⁸⁹ “Letter to the President,” December 22, 1950, Box 371, Papers of HFB Sr.

reductions in military and government spending. While President Truman ignored most of Byrd's recommendations, the senator convinced the president to support tax increases to balance out the federal deficit. By framing the deficit as a national security issue, Byrd concluded that the defense budget would be for nothing if the United States became weakened due to reckless spending.

Initially, Byrd supported the Korean War—another rare point of agreement between Byrd and Truman. According to historian Alden Hatch, “Though Senator Byrd fought most of President Truman’s program so bitterly, he supported him on the Korean War, and voted for the huge military appropriations to carry it on – which is not to say he was happy about it.”⁹⁰ This reveals that Byrd was willing to lay down his penny-pinching approach when he felt national security priorities absolutely called for it. President Truman was committed to a “pay-as-you-go” approach to Korea and raised taxes to account for the defense budget. The “pay-as-you-go” system served as common ground between President Truman and Senator Byrd given Byrd’s popular Virginia highway plan. However, they diverged on how to pay for the war. While President Truman favored raising taxes in order to maintain many of the New Deal and Fair Deal government activities the American people had come to expect, Senator Byrd favored cutting government expenditures.⁹¹ Although he believed that significant tax increases could lead to a recession, in his 1950 budgetary letter to President Truman, Senator Byrd conceded that tax hikes were necessary to balance the budget, and even argued for additional tax increases beyond Truman’s proposal. In the end, he stressed that his plan required these tax increases to be coupled with drastic “retrenchments in non-essential spending.”⁹² President Truman would heed some of

⁹⁰ Hatch, *The Byrds of Virginia*. 490.

⁹¹ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*. 299-302.

⁹² “Letter to the President,” December 22, 1950, Box 371, Papers of HFB Sr.

Byrd's advice, particularly regarding tax increases, but would largely ignore his advice on the budget. In addition, Truman would refute Byrd's ability to add to the debate on the budget of the federal government on the basis that he knew too little about it.⁹³ The relationship between Byrd and Truman was continuing to deteriorate over budgetary issues during the final years of the Truman administration.

Byrd's support for Korea evaporated toward the end of the war. At a Suffolk-Nansemond Chamber of Commerce event he characterized the Korean war "as 'a catastrophe of the first magnitude,' one in which the United States entered unprepared to fight the 'second grade' nation of Korea. ... The UN faces three alternatives he said – (1) stand and fight, (2) go on the defensive or (3) evacuate. It on the latter alternative that he urged on the promise that 'when the situation is hopeless, evacuate and wait for a better day.'"⁹⁴ When Americans turned against the Korean war, it seems that after President Truman initially rejected Byrd's budgetary recommendations, he too began to see the Korean war as a liability for undue national debt. This reveals that while Byrd often took his fiscal conservatism to extremes, others in his party often did not. He was not always alone in his budgetary concerns. Following the Second World War, budgetary concerns became a convenient reason for national politicians to dismantle programs that lost public support.

In 1953, even after Truman left office, Byrd continued to antagonize over the administration's shortcomings in Korea. From his position on the Senate Armed Services Committee, he investigated claims by General James Van Fleet that the troops in Korea were

⁹³ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*. 301

⁹⁴ "Byrd Says Yank Soldiers Should Evacuate Korea" *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA), 6 December 1950, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive," <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19501206.1.1&srpos=4&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-korean+war+byrd----->.

severely affected by supply shortages causing a lack of ammunition on the front lines. This investigation uncovered that President Truman and the Pentagon decided in 1950 “to reduce budgetary shortfalls by cutting back military purchases.”⁹⁵ Byrd labeled these short fallings “criminal inefficiency” and wrote President Eisenhower’s Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson demanding punishment for the military staff responsible.⁹⁶

The Byrd-Eisenhower Alliance

Senator Byrd had a much more amicable relationship with Truman’s successor Dwight Eisenhower. Although Eisenhower had run on the Republican ticket, party affiliation did not prevent a more favorable stance toward the administration. The day after Eisenhower’s election, an editorial appeared in Byrd’s paper the *Winchester Star* which was “sharply critical of ‘politicians’ who had played as usual in endorsing the Stevenson-Sparkman ticket. It named only one Virginian, U.S. Senator A. Willis Robertson but the wording could be interpreted as a blanket indictment of all who had stuck with the national Democratic party.”⁹⁷ At this time Harry Byrd’s son State Senator Harry Byrd Jr. (who would go on to succeed his father in the U.S. Senate) ran *The Winchester Star*, so it is likely that this is reflective of Byrd Sr.’s views as well. Two aspects about this editorial are of note. First, it did not run until after the election signaling that although the Byrds may have personally wanted Eisenhower to win, they were not willing to risk enraging more progressive Virginian Democrats by endorsing Eisenhower. Secondly, in

⁹⁵ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*. 358

⁹⁶ “Top Brass Called Up to Clear Up Reports on Ammunition Shortages,” *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA), 6 March 1953, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive,” <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19530306.1.1&srpos=1&e=--1953---1960--en-20--1--txt-txIN-byrd+korea+armed+services----->.

⁹⁷ “Virginia Gubernatorial Election Beclouded by Ike Election, Byrd Criticism,” *Suffolk News-Herald* (Suffolk, VA), 9 November 1952, Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive,” <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=SNH19521109.1.1&srpos=6&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-byrd+eisenhower----->.

criticizing Stevenson Democrats, the Byrds were continuing to build an ideological barrier between the national Democratic party and the Byrd Organization.

Byrd embraced the initial Eisenhower budget that focused on cutting expenditures on social programs. Having a more sympathetic conservative in the Oval Office proved useful as Senator Byrd's position to influence the national budget grew. In 1955, due to his seniority, Senator Byrd became the Chair of the Senate Finance Committee.⁹⁸ However, though he enjoyed personal friendship with Eisenhower, shortly after becoming chairman of the Finance Committee, they disagreed on one issue: the debt ceiling. The Eisenhower administration would request a fifteen billion dollar increase in the debt ceiling, which Byrd rejected. Using his new authority in the budgetary process, Byrd successfully killed this proposal in committee. Throughout his chairmanship of the Finance Committee, Byrd carried a reputation for bottlenecking bills he opposed.⁹⁹

In addition to his opposition of lifting the debt ceiling, Byrd criticized the way the Eisenhower administration proposed to fund the "National Highway Program." As the pay-as-you-go-highway advocate, Byrd rejected the adoption of debt to fund infrastructure programs. In a statement on the national highway program in 1955, he admonished the Eisenhower Treasury Department for attempting to borrow \$20 billion dollars outside the debt ceiling to fund the aid to states. Byrd proposed an alternative. He believed that Virginia's pay-as-you go gasoline taxes served as a successful model that would allow the government to levy a ½ cent tax on gasoline to fund the aid to states rather than borrowing it. This was actually a reduction from the 2-cent gasoline tax. Byrd argued that lowering the federal gas tax would "permit the states to reimpose

⁹⁸ Hatch, *The Byrds of Virginia*. 495.

⁹⁹ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*.358

it.”¹⁰⁰ This reveals that Byrd not only sought outmoded pay-as-you-go solutions to this huge national infrastructure undertaking. He also felt that it should have been within the purview of the states decide whether to undertake this infrastructure project at all. Byrd himself even advocated for more money to go to “primary, secondary, and urban road systems.”¹⁰¹ Byrd’s assessment of state-by-state allocation of interstate funds overlooked the challenges that all states faced in building a national highway system without the guiding hand of the federal government. Byrd’s fiscal conservatism increasingly overlapped with his social conservatism; his states’ rights advocacy was not just aiding social conservatives, but fiscal conservatives as well.

As the integration crisis in Little Rock raged on, Byrd battled the administration on all fronts when he lambasted the 1957 federal budget. Although the 1957 budget did include \$1.5 billion in cuts, Byrd felt that this was not enough and called for an additional \$5 billion. Although the Eisenhower administration would ultimately get its way in the Little Rock crisis, it would lose to Byrd in this battle and concede \$4 billion in non-defense cut.¹⁰² During the decade that witnessed great economic growth and economic recessions, President Eisenhower swung back and forth between Byrd’s balanced budget approach and an investment-based infrastructure building approach to creating economic stability.

During the final years of the Eisenhower administration, Byrd restored the relationship with the president when presenting a compromise. Heinemann writes, “The recession had produced the largest peacetime deficit in American history - \$12 billion – encouraging Ike to pursue budget balancing with a vengeance. ... In return for southern support on budget issues, Eisenhower did not push for additional civil rights legislation, except to extend the Civil Rights

¹⁰⁰ “The National Highway Program”, January 15, 1955, Box 378, Papers of HFB Sr.

¹⁰¹ “The National Highway Program”, January 15, 1955, Box 378, Papers of HFB Sr.

¹⁰² Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*. 373.

Commission.”¹⁰³ While some southern senators opposed the compromise, this was a win-win situation for Senator Byrd by securing a balanced budget and a promise that he would not have to fight more civil rights legislation. (Even the extension of the Civil Rights Commission was by no means a total defeat for Senator Byrd given that former Virginia Governor and Byrd Organization member John S. Battle sat on the commission.¹⁰⁴)

Byrd secured compromises from the executive when writing the budget. Byrd’s greatest success occurred during a Republican presidency of his legislative career when influencing the national budget. This success signaled a shift in the Republican party during the Eisenhower presidency, and the increasing isolation Byrd and fellow conservatives became subject to in the Democratic party. Senator Byrd and the Eisenhower administration largely parted ways on amicable terms. David Kendall, the Special Counsel to the President, wrote to Byrd a few days before Kennedy’s inauguration: “The achievement of the balance which President Eisenhower has sought between extremes has been greatly assisted, in my judgement, by your knowing and high-minded (oftentimes despite serious difficulties) statesmanship.”¹⁰⁵ This sentiment displays that even Eisenhower officials developed warm feelings towards Byrd.

Byrd’s Clashes with John F. Kennedy

Although Byrd developed a personal relationship with John F. Kennedy and had supported his Vice-Presidential bid over integrationist Senator Estes Kefauver at the 1956 Democratic National Convention, he did not want to see him become president in 1960. He again maintained his “Golden Silence.” From the onset of Kennedy’s presidency, Byrd feared that diminished power

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 375.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from David Kendall to Harry Byrd, January 16, 1961, Box 270, Papers of HFB Sr.

in the Senate would be diminished. For this reason, Byrd was invited by Kennedy to his estate in Palm Springs, Florida. Most flatteringly, Kennedy was the first president to attend Byrd's birthday picnic at Rosemont. Heinemann asserts, "Byrd had not been a major player in the United States Senate."¹⁰⁶ However, the fact that President Kennedy (a man who had served in the Senate with Byrd for the last eight years) felt the need to court Byrd as he did, suggests that Byrd wielded at least some influence in the Senate. Although he may not have been the most outspoken senator, particularly near the end of his career, by virtue of his seniority and accrued political influence, Byrd was able to obstruct aspects of Kennedy's agenda.

Kennedy's fiscal policy was a departure from the Eisenhower's administration. Kennedy's New Frontier returned to the non-defense expenditures of the Truman and Roosevelt administrations. *Northern Virginia Sun* noted, "President Kennedy's proposals to put more money in the pockets of widows, needy old folks and the jobless workers had such broad appeal to voters that GOP congressional strategists were reluctant to take stands against them."¹⁰⁷ Senator Byrd, however, did not hold back criticism. Byrd opposed many of President Kennedy's proposed legislation during the summer of 1961. Throughout his administration President Kennedy grew increasingly tired of Senator Byrd's arguments over growing the federal budget. According to his aide Theodore Sorenson, "He was waiting for the day when an attack on his fiscal 'irresponsibility' by Senator Harry Byrd would give him an opening to compare Virginia's fiscal record under the Byrd machine with the Federal Government's." The Kennedy administration kept a chart for just such an occasion which displayed the increase in total debt

¹⁰⁶ Heinemann, Ronald L., *Harry Byrd of Virginia*. 418.

¹⁰⁷ "Kennedy's Effort to Aid Needy People Meets Wide Appeal," *Northern Virginia Sun* (Fairfax County, VA), 3 February 1961 — Virginia Chronicle: Digital Newspaper Archive," <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=NVS19610203.1.3&srpos=3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-kennedy+budget--->

from 1948 to 1961 of both the United States and the state of Virginia. The U.S. increased 17% whereas Virginia increased 864%.¹⁰⁸ The fact that Kennedy felt the need to keep numbers reminding Byrd to get his own house in order before turning on the administration reveals what a nuisance, he was to the administration's agenda in Congress. It also shows Byrd's success in forcing policies during the Kennedy administration.

Tax cuts represented a major point of contention between Senator Byrd and President Kennedy. Kennedy wanted to cut taxes to stimulate economic growth while Byrd feared that decreasing the revenue of the federal government would lead to more debt. Byrd's opposition ultimately contributed to the failure of the 1963 tax cuts. Already sounding weary of his efforts in the Senate, Byrd declared, "I have experienced combat fatigue at times; I have taken some shell shock; and I am a battle-scared veteran from fighting for the promised New Deal."¹⁰⁹ Here Byrd casts himself as the battle-weary Southern soldier valiantly fighting to right the wrongs of the South's parting with the national Democratic party. The reference to the New Deal recalls the Southern split from Roosevelt at the beginning of his time in the Senate. Byrd had continued to shrink the budget of the federal government and thereby limit the aid given to those most in need. Byrd was still fighting for the "original" New Deal at a time when other Democrats like Kennedy wanted to expand it. His tone echoes the "Still Fighting the Civil War" mentality Feldmann and Godfield ascribe to the South. As Byrd's final years in the Senate neared, his characterization of his own political efforts became another lost cause.

Byrd Surrenders to Johnson

¹⁰⁸ Ted Sorensen, *Kennedy: The Classic Biography* (Harper Collins, 1965). 418-419.

¹⁰⁹ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 397.

Following Kennedy's assassination in November of 1963, Byrd's Senate colleague and vice president, Lyndon Johnson, assumed the presidency. Building on Kennedy's New Frontier, President Johnson's Great Society program expanded the budget of the government which Byrd protested vehemently. Adding insult to political injury, Johnson's choice for Vice President was Senator Byrd's long-time Senate rival Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey's rise to power was congruous with Byrd's fall from grace. In many ways Humphrey was Byrd's foil, a young progressive Northern Senator, versus the aged conservative Southerner.

Ultimately, Johnson convinced Byrd to support Kennedy's proposed tax cuts through the Finance Committee in 1964. Known for his strong-arming of legislators, Johnson would summon Byrd to the White House shortly after he became president. It seems an aged, and increasingly senile Byrd did not put up much of a fight for Johnson. The president insisted, "Harry, I know you're opposed to tax reduction, but I've got to have that bill out of committee. We owe it to the late president. I know you can't vote for it, but don't bottle it up. Will you give me your word that you'll report it out?" asked Johnson. "Lyndon, if you want that bill out, I'll do nothing to stop it." Byrd replied.¹¹⁰ As Byrd aged, it seems his will to continue the (losing) battle of his obstructionism diminished.

In one last, largely symbolic act of budgetary constraint, Byrd battled with the Johnson administration over the size of the federal budget. Byrd attempted to keep the overall federal budget under \$100 billion. However, Johnson kept the 1964 budget to almost \$98 billion dollars. He told Byrd: "Now you can tell your friends that you forced the President of the United States to reduce the budget before you let him have his tax cut."¹¹¹ Though Byrd did not walk away from these budget negotiations with everything he wanted, he seemed to trust that Johnson

¹¹⁰ Dan Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy* (Boston, Mass: Harvard University, 2007).

¹¹¹ Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 400.

sincerely aimed to give him what he could. After decades of campaigning for expenditure reduction against an ever-ballooning national budget, it seems Byrd's vigor was beginning to wear thin. Byrd ran for reelection one last time in 1964 but understood that his concession alienated his political base in Virginia. An aging Byrd clung to out of touch ideals that undercut his influence in the Senate.

Byrd's conservative fiscal policies support historian Glenn Feldman's claim: "the American South has shown itself the purest expression of a 'status quo society' that Western civilization has yet to conjure. In such a society, cultural norms have taken a whole step - or more - to the right. Right-wing reaction passes for conservatism, conservatism is moderation, centrism is liberalism, liberalism is radicalism and genuine radical alternative is impossible."¹¹² Senator Byrd's fiscal conservatism exhibited trends that date back to the Civil War. Virginia's post-Civil War debt left the state in financial disarray that Byrd sought to recover during his career as a governor. And as he dominated Virginia's political landscape for almost a half-century, he carried these conservative views into the future and onto the national stage during the post-World War Two years.

The degree to which conservatives today draw inspiration from Senator Byrd politics and methods of politicking, is difficult to determine. However, it is certain that much of the language Byrd used to describe government was adopted by his conservative successors. He attacked the welfare state as "that state of twilight in which the glow of democratic is fading beyond the horizon leaving us to be swallowed up by the blackness of socialism or worse."¹¹³ He feared that the strength of the American dollar would collapse: "Once the American dollar goes down, we

¹¹² Feldman, *Painting Dixie Red*. 9.

¹¹³ Chitose Sato, "Senator Harry F. Byrd and the New Deal Reform Policy in Virginia, 1933-1938," (Williamsburg, Virginia, The College of William and Mary, 1991), <http://www.proquest.com/docview/1955346263?pq-origsite=primo>. 21.

will all be in an age of international darkness. The American dollar is the only thing holding the world together.”¹¹⁴ And, he railed against debt and the deficit: “we are chasing the mirage of easy money in the form of deficit dollars.”¹¹⁵ All of these positions framed America as the global defender against “socialism” in a way that resonates with the messaging of the conservative movements of today.

Harry Byrd’s life and career served as a guiding force in the transition towards conservative Republicanism wading its way toward Southern dominance after his career. Senator Byrd’s fiscal policies resonated with white voters across the South, especially in the twenty-first century. Following the New Deal, the link between federal aid and federal civil rights protections in its relationship with the states shaped white southerners’ attitudes towards “big government” which was embraced by President Reagan and the Republican party in the 1980s and onwards.

Senator Byrd’s view of freedom would leave a lasting imprint on this debate. In many ways Byrd saw the government as a servant not only to the people, but to the market. Byrd felt that the government’s provision of non-defense services was an infringement on the independence and self-reliance required for a healthy free market. He saw it as the duty of the government to protect its citizens by keeping schools segregated and prohibiting interracial marriages. This particular dynamic of a free market but a regulated society is still a major part of the conservative movement in America today.

“Lost Souls”: Byrd’s Final Years in the Senate

In a letter to Byrd, New York Republican and President of Aircooled Motors, Inc. C. F. B. Roth encouraged the senator: “You should know that in this area many old line Republicans were

¹¹⁴ James R. Sweeney, “Revolt in Virginia: Harry Byrd and the 1952 Presidential Election,” 603.

¹¹⁵ Sato, “Senator Harry F. Byrd and the New Deal Reform Policy in Virginia, 1933-1938,” 21.

delighted to read that you had reconsidered the matter of again serving in the Senate. I am confident that his sentiment prevails in many other areas where there are lost souls—old line Democrats and Republicans.”¹¹⁶ When Harry Byrd announced that he would not follow through with retirement in 1958 and became a candidate, a flood of grateful supporters wrote him to congratulate him. Arkansas Republican R. W. Rightsell wrote to him as well: “I read with great pleasure, that you had decided to serve us as Senator from Virginia again. I consider you, Senator John L. McClellan, President Eisenhower great statesmen and men that we need very much to look after our interest.”¹¹⁷ Irving B. Muller of Pennsylvania wrote Byrd saying “I have been a Republican voter, Committeeman, and local office holder since 1865, anf [sic] my only regret is that I am unable to give you any help as far as a vote is concerned.” Fred Mayer of California wrote “I have been a life-long Republican, in the vain hope of belonging to the party of conservatism. I would joyfully vote for you for President of the U.S.A.”

¹¹⁶ C. F. B. Roth to Harry Byrd, March 7, 1958, HFB papers.

¹¹⁷ R.W. Rightsell to Harry Byrd, March 20, 1958, Box 259, Papers of HFB Sr.

Thelma T. Robinson, M.D.
606 North Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills, California

March 19, 1958

The Honorable Harry F. Byrd,
United States Senate,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Senator Byrd:

Like everyone else with whom I have spoken, I was downhearted and depressed on hearing that you were going to retire from the Senate. I would prefer to lose any other man in the Senate before you. Though a Republican, I could easily take the loss of the President of the United States before you.

What a boost it was to our spirits to hear that you had agreed to reverse your decision! I cannot help but feel that Mrs. Byrd was very much responsible and we are deeply indebted to her.

Men with your intellectual acuity, integrity and experience are very scarce and growing scarcer in Washington.

With three more years of Eisenhower, I feel very uncertain of our chance to be saved from fiscal insolvency and the end of free enterprise in this country. You are just about the only Hope we have left.

Please call directly upon your conservative backing all over the country for a deluge of letters whenever you need a response, in the course of your fight.

Sincerely yours,
Thelma T. Robinson,
Thelma T. Robinson, M. D.

P.S. Please do not take the time or spend the money to answer this letter. I'd rather be able to write it and to have it no extra burden to you or your office.

Figure 3: Letter to Byrd from Thelma Robinson

Many of these supporters had little reason, on paper, to celebrate Byrd's continued service. Much of the praise for Byrd in 1958 came from out-of-state Republicans who saw him as an ally to the conservative cause. California Republican Dr. Thelma Robinson wrote "With three more years of Eisenhower, I feel very uncertain of our chance to be saved from fiscal insolvency and the end of free enterprise in this country. You are just about the only hope we have left. Please call directly upon your conservative backing all over the country for a deluge of letters whenever you need a response in the course of your fight."¹¹⁸ Notably Robinson regards Byrd as a truer fiscal conservative than Eisenhower. Additionally, the sincere embrace of the abhorrence against frivolous spending (of any sort), Robinson's post scriptum advises: "Please

¹¹⁸ Thelma Robinson M.D. to Harry Byrd, March 19, 1958, Box 259, Papers of HFB Sr.

do not take the time or spend the money to answer this letter. I'd rather be able to write and to have it no extra burden to your office."¹¹⁹ Virginia became a swing state where Republicans have stood a competitive chance of winning state-wide elections. For many of them, Senator Byrd was likely the closest representative to a Republican they felt would carry out their values in Virginia.

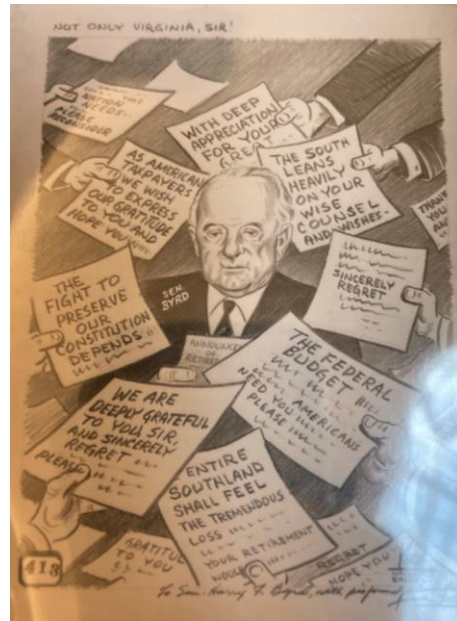


Figure 4: “Not Only Virginia, Sir”¹²⁰

Figure 3, a cartoon Senator Byrd kept in 1958, offers a powerful visual of Byrd being surrounded by pleas to reconsider retirement or letters of gratitude for his decision to stand for reelection. This cartoon highlights not only the outpouring of support he received, but also the confusion that surrounded the two-week period in which he announced his retirement and subsequently announced his reconsideration. What is telling is the speed by which those who heard his initial announcement implored him to reconsider. The title “Not Only Virginia, Sir” also accurately reflected the range of places Byrd’s correspondents resided. Many were conservatives outside Virginia. This indicates the growing support Byrd garnered from conservatives nationwide by

¹¹⁹ Thelma Robinson M.D. to Harry Byrd, March 19, 1958, Box 259, Papers of HFB Sr.

¹²⁰ “Not Only Virginia, Sir,” Cartoon Collection, Photographs, and Awards, Box H, Papers of HFB Sr.

the end of his career. In his letter to Byrd, Illinois Republican William Rutherford lamented, “I just wish there were a way we northern and southern conservatives could get together, and you are the man of men who could solve that problem. Your brand of southern Democrats are the kind of people I was raised to respect as northern Republicans – and while I am aware of how people in your area feel about Republicans, I am sure you can recognize why it is hard for respectable people in this area to think well of northern Democrats.”¹²¹ In their missive to Byrd, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Schwartz of Oklahoma promised: “We are two Republicans who would be the happiest people in the world if we could cast our votes for you for President.”¹²² These letters highlight that Byrd’s fiscal and social conservatism were appealing to a growing national audience outside the South in the final decade of his career. In this regard the cartoon “Not Only Virginia, Sir” was hardly an exaggeration. It is a testament to the national patronage Byrd’s brand of conservatism gained. So many Americans besides his Virginian constituents wrote to express their support for his continued service in the Senate, and many had higher office in mind for Byrd.

Senator Byrd’s flirtation with the Republican party would ultimately hark back to his extremely difficult relationship with the Truman administration. After the failed Dixiecrat revolt of 1948, preparations were already being made for a second Truman run in 1952. (Because of the loophole written into the 22nd Amendment President Truman was allowed to seek another term in 1952 even though he had served more than half of Roosevelt’s fourth term.)

However, President Truman would decide not to seek reelection in 1952. Byrd did not support the nominee of the Democratic party, Governor Adlai Stevenson of New York. His animosity for Governor Stevenson, combined with his admiration for the Republican nominee,

¹²¹ William Rutherford to Harry Byrd, February 25, 1958, Box 259, Papers of HFB Sr.

¹²² Harry Schwartz to Harry Byrd, February 26, 1958, Box 259, Papers of HFB Sr.

General Dwight Eisenhower led Byrd to step away from the 1952 presidential contest, and move toward in-all-but name Republican conservatism. His conservative nature did not outweigh his Democratic partisanship during his lifetime, perhaps because of his own perception of the Democratic party's place in Virginian and white Southern heritage. But his evolving views pushed him towards forging alliances with Republicans, conservative Democrats and Independents alike, or, remain silent.

In 1952 Byrd entered a period of "Golden Silence." He did not endorse Stevenson or Eisenhower but stepped back to allow the candidates to compete for Virginia. Though this did not explicitly signal his preference, his refusal to use the Byrd Organization to get out the vote for Stevenson, and his privately mentioned relief over Eisenhower's victory, confirmed his political leanings during 1952 election. His silence was likely also a product of the political dilemma to protect his own interests against long shot candidate Dr. Louise Wensel. His encouragement of voters to pick Eisenhower could have resulted in down-ballot slippage towards Wensel. Although his split with the Truman administration represented a falling out with the national Democratic party, Byrd's refusal to denounce Eisenhower and support Adlai Stevenson was the first tacit nod towards Republican conservatism. Although the Republican party had not fared well in state-wide elections after the Bourbon period in the 1880s, Byrd took no election victory for granted.

In addition to his Golden Silence policy and amicable relationship with President Eisenhower throughout the 1950s, Senator Byrd established the Virginia Commission on Constitutional Government in 1958—another step that brought the Republican Party and Byrd closer together. According to George Lewis, "The commission's chairman, David J. Mays, had long been adamant that southern resistance would fail if the region's segregationists continued to

fight the federal government in purely sectional terms. Too many of his segregationist peers, he believed, were focusing exclusively on the need to appeal to fellow southerners for support and thus were achieving little other than preaching to the converted.”¹²³ Led by Chairman Mays, Commission on Constitutional Government expanded its geographic scope by building alliances with conservative Republicans in states like Pennsylvania, advancing the segregationist movement. Though this initiative was largely unsuccessful, it exposed the increasing ideological alignment between Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans.

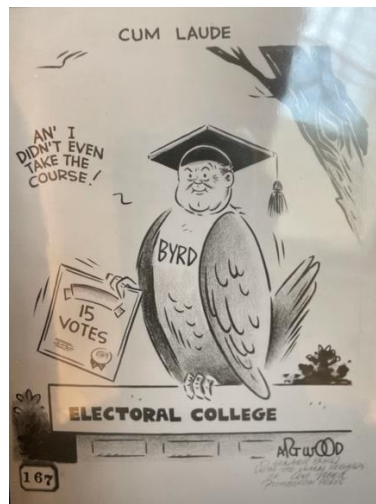


Figure 5: *Cum Laude*¹²⁴

In 1960, discussions emerged about a new “Constitutional party or Bill of Rights party” and Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona as the presidential nominee and Senator Byrd as running mate.¹²⁵ Both senators rejected the idea, but the emergence of the states’ rights rhetoric beyond the South was undeniable. Ultimately, Byrd never parted from the Democratic party and retired as a Democrat in November of 1965. Senator Byrd’s political power relied on his state Organization in Virginia which helps explain his loyalty toward the Democratic Party.

¹²³ Feldman, *Painting Dixie Red*, chap. “Virginia’s Northern Strategy,” George Lewis, 100-101.

¹²⁴ Cartoon Collection, Photographs, and Awards, Box H, Papers of HFB Sr.

¹²⁵ James R. Sweeney, “Whispers in the Golden Silence: Harry F. Byrd, Sr., John F. Kennedy, and Virginia Democrats in the 1960 Presidential Election,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, no. 1 (1991): 79.

Figure 4 shows a cartoon about “graduating” the electoral college. Byrd won 15 electoral votes in the 1960 presidential election in Mississippi, Alabama, and Oklahoma. In the cartoon, Byrd is pictured saying “An’ I didn’t even take the course!” The cartoon underscores that Byrd received non-Virginians votes without having openly campaigned for them. Most of these were cast by conservative Democrats who did not see themselves represented by either Kennedy or Nixon (see Figure 5). By 1960, Byrd had established a national reputation as a Southern conservative.

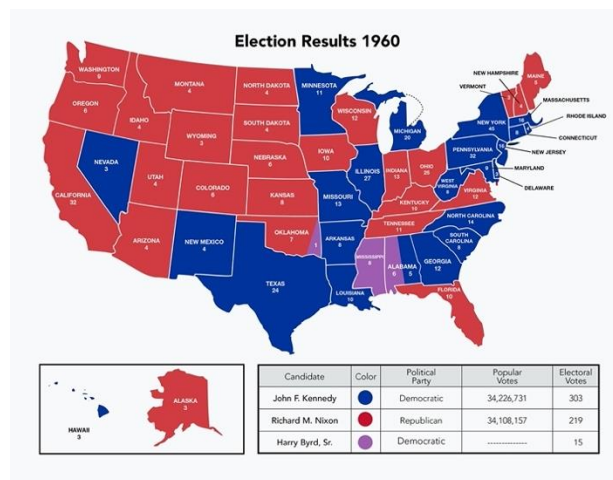


Figure 6: 1960 Electoral Map¹²⁶

In an interview with *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reporter Jim Latimer about the Byrd Organization former Governor Colgate Darden defended the independence of the voter. Latimer explained: “There’s a lot of mythology and folklore in Virginia about that time during the Byrd Organization era that Senator Byrd would give somebody the nod, or anoint them, or something like that.” He asked Darden: “Are you aware of any such thing that happened to you at that time?” Darden responded, “No, of course Harry was undoubtedly the leader of the Organization and an enormously able leader of the Organization, but I always felt in watching it over the years

¹²⁶ “Election Results 1960 with Chart.Jpg (3300×2550),” JFK Presidential Library, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Election%20Results%201960%20with%20Chart.jpg>.

... that he made a calculation ... coming to the conclusion of who the most likely candidate was to win and working around and helping as a result of that.”¹²⁷ Although Darden may have felt Byrd’s nod was a calculation, given the influence Byrd had over his Organization and the Democratic party, the nod itself could turn the tides of elections. Byrd’s endorsement was a requirement upon which all Democratic candidacies in Virginia depended on for success—a sign that conservatism did not rely on party affiliation, but Byrd’s approval.

The Organization depended on the infrastructure of the Virginia States Democratic party for its operation. As much as Byrd may have disagreed with the national Democratic party, his regional base of power necessitated the affiliation. Especially if Byrd were to join the Republican party, he could not expect the same level of party dominance that he had inherited and expanded upon in the Democratic party. The Byrd Organization was built on decades of political machine infrastructure within the Virginia Democratic party and abandoning that state party for the Republican party would have meant discarding a party system designed to consolidate Byrd’s power and starting fresh on the other side. And, of course, they would not be able to guarantee that all supporters would follow. Voters on both sides may have seen him as a turncoat and cast their lots with anti-Byrd factions in both parties. Harry Byrd only enjoyed one year of retirement before he passed away in 1966. His son, Harry Byrd Jr., had already inherited his Senate seat. Under his son’s service in the Senate, the Byrd Organization collapsed. Harry Byrd Jr. served in the Senate until 1983 as an Independent by 1970. Even in the decade following his death, Harry Byrd Sr.’s nominal loyalty to the Democratic party would serve as a barrier preventing his son from officially joining the Republican party during his own Senate terms.

¹²⁷ Jim Latimer, "Living History Makers: Colgate Darden on Harry Byrd," Library of Virginia, 1975, pub. 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZF3fwDXq1I>.

The legacy that Harry F. Byrd left behind remains murky. Contemporaries praised him for personal character and a gentlemanly nature. However, considering his efforts to subvert democracy in Virginia, his Byrd Organization schemes, and his acceptance of systemic racism and disenfranchisement, Harry Byrd's political legacy exposed the hallmarks of modern conservatism. In an age of progressive reform and the expansion of government services, Byrd's contribution was to stem the tide of progress. Byrd's loud obstructionism and later quiet resistance to the growing liberalization of the Democratic party perhaps served as a model for conservative politicking in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Recently, Harry Byrd's name made news again in Virginia. After a debate in the Virginia General Assembly, a statue of Byrd that had been erected in 1976 was taken down in 2021.¹²⁸ Byrd's legacy as the "architect" of the massive resistance provoked the debate in the wake of George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement. Black Caucus member and Senator Jennifer McClellan said, "When I was an intern in this body ... working for the first African American Governor and walked past that statue every day I knew I was his worst nightmare."¹²⁹ While Virginia's modern-day Democratic Party has divorced itself from Harry Byrd's legacy, it seems to live on through the modern Republican Party.

¹²⁸ "Virginia Removes Segregationist's Statue from Capitol Square," AP NEWS, July 7, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/virginia-government-and-politics-b1a2b7cdebb4e7f4a6f6601786c80953>.

¹²⁹ lowkell, *Debate and Vote on Harry Byrd Statue (2/23/21)*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyZ7b5-KAzY>.

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