

Richard B. Russell, Jr. Oral History Project
RBROH-104
Senator Robert C. Byrd interviewed by Hugh Cates
April 29, 1971

CATES: This is April 29th, 1971. I'm in the Capitol office of U. S. Senator Robert Byrd, a Democrat from West Virginia. Senator Byrd is a member of the Appropriations Committee. He was elected Senate Democratic Majority Whip on January 21, 1971--is that date correct, Senator?

BYRD: That is correct.

CATES: He had in his possession at that time a proxy vote from the late Senator Richard Brevard Russell, and at some point in this conversation we will certainly discuss this proxy vote. But at the beginning, Senator, would you like to just recall anything that comes to mind about your association with the late Senator?

BYRD: Thank you. I served in the United States Senate for twelve years with the late, departed and beloved, senior Senator from Georgia--Richard Russell. During my twelve years of service in the Senate, I was on the Appropriations Committee and I also was a member of the Armed Services Committee for a part of that time. On both of those committees I served with Senator Russell. He was chairman of the Armed Services Committee when I went on that committee and he later became chairman of the Appropriations Committee; and during my services with him on those committees, I was impressed by his remarkable knowledge of the subject matter of legislation, which was within the jurisdiction of those two committees. Over and above this, I was amazed at his incredible knowledge of government. I think he knew more about the operations of the federal government than any man in Washington, and he was always able to articulate his viewpoint in such a calm and reasoned manner that his colleagues--all of whom were certainly junior to him during the last years--were always persuaded or, if not persuaded, certainly impressed. He had tremendous influence over all of us.

He was my mentor. I admired him more than any man in Washington. I admired him because of his character, because of his consummate skill as a parliamentarian, because of his common-sense judgment on matters, and because of his fairness. Whether or not he agreed with an individual, he always was fair to the other person. He never sought undue advantage, he never sought to gain any advantage by virtue of his tenure or his seniority or his parliamentary skill. He was always fair to the other individual. It didn't make any difference how strongly he may have disagreed with the opinions of others.

He had a tremendous vocabulary, and he seemed to know just how to say the right thing and to use the right word at the right time. He was recognized by all other senators as the best parliamentarian in the Senate membership, and of course, he acquired this recognition by virtue of his close and very serious and thoughtful study of the rules and precedents over the many years in which he served in the Senate. He was an inspiration to me. I, in the first place--like every other senator--had absolute confidence in the integrity of Senator Russell. His word was absolutely dependable. He was impeccably honest; he was absolutely sincere; he was never

affected. I think his motto might well have been that of the state of North Carolina--the state in which I was born--To be, rather than to seem.

Senator Russell was the one senator for whom I never dropped the title of senator. During my twelve years in the Senate, I never, in speaking to Senator Russell, I never said, "Hello, Dick," as many of my senior colleagues did. I always, to the very end, in speaking with him addressed him a Senator Russell. He was that kind of senator. He was the one man in my twelve years in the Senate who personified the best that is in a good public servant, the best that is in the Senate itself. The Senate was his life, and I suppose he believed--even more than [William Ewart] Gladstone believed--that the Senate was the most remarkable of all the inventions of modern politics. I never again expect to see--if I live fifty years and if I'm able to serve in the Senate for fifty years, I never expect to see another man like Richard B. Russell. I have said a number of times that the two men in my life who impressed me as being the greatest men that I ever knew were Richard Russell and my foster father; and I suppose that above all, in both of those men, that cause me to have this feeling was that one word--character.

Senator Russell was a great admirer of Robert E. Lee, and I've often heard him quote Lee with respect to the word "duty"; and I believe that Senator Russell by his service in public life and by the kind of life he lived exemplified a thorough dedication and devotion to duty. He was a statesman in every sense of the word. He loved his country. He loved the United States Senate, and although he is gone now from the Senate, his spirit will never cease to make itself felt in that body as long as those of us who knew him live and are able to be a part of that body. Not only the state of Georgia lost its most illustrious son, but the United States Senate lost the greatest United States Senator in a century, and the nation lost its most capable leader--a man who ought to have been President, a man who could have been one of our country's greatest presidents had the eyes of some of his compatriots not been blinded by prejudice toward a region. This was a man--whence cometh another?

CATES: Senator Byrd, I would like to ask you--and I would like to say this before I ask you anything, that perhaps this is the best opening statement anyone has made to this point--and I know what you said came from the heart--and I want to commend you on this opening statement. I think that historians and researchers of the future would find that it was, perhaps, very significant that Senator Russell had given you his proxy vote, and this proxy vote was used just a matter of hours before he passed on--I believe that the time of day that he died was in the afternoon. And I would like to ask you if you could comment in any way concerning the proxy as to how you obtained it--whether or not he voluntarily came to you, or if you asked him, or you had emissaries, or anything that you would like to say about this--because, here again, as you pointed out the Senate was his life. He cared very greatly about the Senate and the future of the Senate, and in this way his proxy vote being cast on the day that he died was kind of--not ironic but--I don't know exactly what word to use, but anyway this did happen; and it is a matter of public record that you said that if you had not had his proxy vote you would not really have sought this position, although, as I also recall, it was not really needed because you had enough votes, I think, much to your surprise. Would you comment in this area?

BYRD: Well, there was never any doubt in my mind as to where Senator Russell would be found standing in the event I ran for office of Whip. Once--I recall--in discussing some matter with him, I said to him that I had never lived with my true father in my recollection--I've been

separated from him since I was ten months old--but that I felt that my affection for Senator Russell was that of a son toward his father; whereupon he said to me that he had never had a son, but that he felt toward me as he thought he would have felt toward a son. I never wanted to bother Senator Russell or impose on his time; I respected this man, I held him in awe. And so it wasn't a day-to-day relationship with him or a companionship at all, it was just a tremendous respect, affection, admiration, and gratitude that I had toward this man. He was the leader of the Southern bloc; he was the master tactician--the top general of the legislative forces. I discussed the possibility of my running for Whip when he was last on the Senate Floor, and Senator Russell said, "Well, Robert, you never have to be concerned about where I stand," but he said, "Be sure you've got the vote."

I went about getting the proxy by discussing the matter with a member of his staff. I wrote a letter to Senator Russell while he was in the hospital and indicated to him that I hoped he would be present on the day of the caucus, but that if he found it impossible to be present, I would appreciate it if he would provide through the Majority Leader by way of his colleague--Senator [Herman Eugene] Talmadge--a proxy which I could use in the event I was a candidate for the office of Whip. That letter was delivered to him by a member of his office staff, and from time to time I would talk with the staff member to inquire about Senator Russell's condition. On Monday prior to the death of Senator Russell--I believe it was on Wednesday or Thursday--he died on the 21st--but on Monday of that week, the staff member in Senator Russell's office proceeded to have Senator Russell sign a proxy. The member of the staff was convinced that Senator Russell was not going to be able to come to the caucus in person and he felt that he had best proceed to ask Senator Russell about signing a written proxy. So Senator Russell signed that proxy on Monday--and I'm told that it was the last paper that he signed of any description at all--and then following that, his condition deteriorated rather rapidly. Then, on Thursday, I rose early and came to the office and contacted Senator Talmadge to inquire as to Senator Russell's condition. He said there had been no change in his condition, and so when I went to the caucus--I believe it was called for ten o'clock--I went to the caucus, Senator Talmadge indicated that he had asked a member of his staff to check again just before he had left the office and that Senator--a member of his staff would come shortly and indicate whether or not there was any further change in Senator Russell's condition. And as it happened there was no further change at that point. So I was--so I proceeded--the--Senator Russell's staff had provided Senator Talmadge with the proxy. Senator Talmadge transmitted it to the Majority Leader--Mr. [Michael Joseph [Mike]] Mansfield--and then at the caucus Mr. Mansfield cast the vote for--in behalf of Senator Russell--the vote was cast for me. You may be interested to know that that proxy is framed and mounted on my office wall, and I will always cherish it.

CATES: Senator Byrd, one point, I guess, that we haven't touched on in connection with the proxy and that is, that the newspapers reported that you said that without that proxy you would have never tried for the Majority Whip of the Senate. Is that true?

BYRD: I think I perhaps did say that, and at the moment I said it I'm sure that I felt that that was true. However, there were other thoughts in my mind that morning, too; and one thought was this, that if Senator Russell in his weakened condition and living in his last hours--certainly days--had the courage and the determination to provide a written proxy to me that I should have the courage to make the effort, win or lose. And I believe that what I'm saying is with respect to simply this,

that had--when the caucus began at ten o'clock had the news reached me that Senator Russell had passed on, his proxy--the written proxy--then would, of course, have been invalid; it could not have been used. I think had I been confronted with that circumstance that I probably would have gone ahead to run out of respect for him, because I think that I would not have felt well within myself to have known that he provided me with a proxy to use. I think he would have been disappointed had I not gone ahead even though by virtue of his passing--if he had passed on before the hour of ten o'clock--his written proxy would have been invalidated. So, I think that when the chips were down had he not been living I would have gone on in honor to his proxy and in honor to him.

CATES: Senator Byrd, this proxy will have additional meaning to you, I think, after I tell you what I'm about to tell you. This morning I was out at Walter Reed Hospital and I interviewed two of the doctors, and they talked to me about the autopsy and they told me that they found that especially his left lung--due to the radiation that he had received--there was absolutely no elasticity to it and very, very little in the other lung, and that it was just amazing that he could breathe at all and this--it was an effort for him to do anything.

BYRD: Yes.

CATES: And another thing that they told me, which will help and have little additional meaning to the proxy, is that he would just be so way down; and yet, somebody would come by out there to see him--someone that meant something to him--and he would masquerade, and they would go away thinking that he felt great.

BYRD: Yeah.

CATES: He would not feel great.

BYRD: Yeah.

CATES: So, this proxy does have a real meaning--

BYRD: Yeah.

Cates: --to it. Senator, I know that you said you had to be downtown at 6:00 p.m. It's now twenty-five minutes to 6:00 p.m. I have other questions that I could ask you, but I won't at this time. One question that I generally ask a person at the end of the interview is, "What is the most outstanding personality trait?" But I think you've already answered that in your opening statement, and that was "character." Before we do close, do you have anything else that you would like to say about Senator Russell--his time in the Senate, the influence of his in the Senate in the future, or anything that you might want to say about him?

BYRD: (pause) No, I don't think I could say anymore.

CATES: I want to thank you on behalf of the University of Georgia and the Richard Russell Foundation for a very excellent interview on your part.

BYRD: Thank you very much.

CATES: Thank you, Senator.

Richard B. Powell
Library for Political Research and Studies