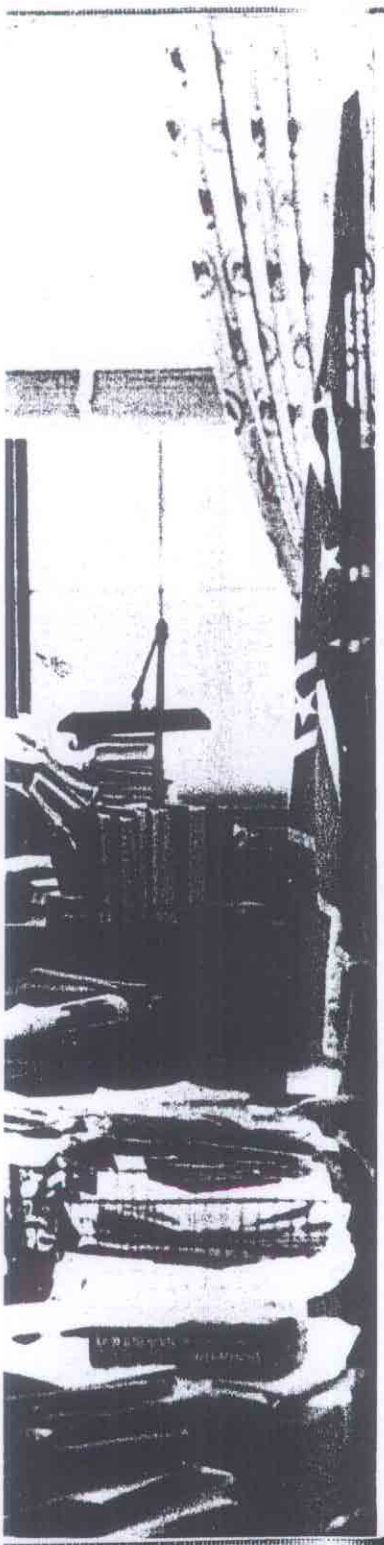

RICHARD B. RUSSELL, JR.,

SENATOR FROM GEORGIA

BY GILBERT C. FITE

THE FRED W. MORRISON SERIES IN SOUTHERN STUDIES

Excerpts
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Preface

Writing a biography of "Richard Brevard Russell, Democrat, of Winder, Ga.," as he liked to be known, has been a challenging but rewarding adventure. Russell's contemporaries found him a difficult man to understand, and the passage of time since his death in 1971 has not done much to clarify his enigmatic character. Indeed, Russell was in many ways a complex and contradictory figure. A quiet, reserved, and modest man, he relished the frequent praise heaped upon him; although he never married, he believed deeply in family values; he had many admirers in Georgia and throughout the nation but very few close personal friends; and he held no personal ill will toward blacks, but he was largely responsible for delaying effective civil rights legislation for nearly twenty years. These and other seeming inconsistencies and contradictions may make it difficult to understand Russell the man, but they in no way cloud his long career of distinguished public service. It is my hope that this biography will help explain Russell's thought, his strength of character, and his contributions to his state and nation. Because of his penchant for secrecy on some matters, not all of Russell's actions can be adequately explained. This was especially true in regard to aspects of national defense and his oversight of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Born on November 2, 1897, and reared in an elite southern family, Russell grew up in a highly stratified and class-conscious society. No other factor made such a deep impression on him as his upbringing and residence in the South and his understanding of the region's history. The Russell family planned that Richard, Jr., the oldest son, would pursue a political career, and that he did. He served in public life from 1921 to 1971, a period that witnessed some of the most dramatic and far-reaching changes of any half century in American history. After ten years in the Georgia General Assembly, the last four as Speaker of the House, he was elected governor in 1930. He served in that office from 1931 to

January 1933, when he began his thirty-eight years in the U.S. Senate. Russell spent more than two-thirds of his life in elective office and more than half of it in the Senate. He worked with six presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Richard M. Nixon.

During his long public career, Russell lived through a virtual revolution in American life and society. From the 1920s until his death, the United States experienced the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, World War II, the cold war, the beginning of the nuclear age, the exploration of space, a great expansion of the welfare state, a vast increase in the nation's international responsibilities, the civil rights movement, and a host of other changes. Russell was a key participant in many of these revolutionary developments and adjusted to much of the rapid change that characterized the twentieth century. But he could never abandon his dedication to the South's traditional social values. The issue on which his ideas and attitudes could not be modified was racial equality and integration. Because of his unwillingness to adjust to, or compromise on, this matter, and his masterminding of the anti–civil rights forces, he had to remain content with regional rather than true national leadership.

This did not mean that Russell failed to achieve national recognition. He did and for very good reasons. He became one of the nation's strongest supporters of economic equality for American farmers. He fathered the school lunch program and supported the distribution of surplus food to the needy. Russell served on the Senate Appropriations Committee from the time he arrived in Washington until his death, the last two years as chairman. As a member of that committee, there was little major legislation that he did not affect in some way. He calmed the national hysteria that surrounded the dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur in 1951 by conducting hearings on the issue with integrity and fairness, and a year later, he ran a respectable campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Perhaps his greatest contribution was his determination to maintain a strong national defense during the cold war era. As chairman of the Armed Services Committee from 1951 to 1953 and from 1955 to 1969, Russell emerged as the acknowledged leader in Congress on defense matters. Also of great importance was his legislative skill and knowledge of Senate rules, which permitted him to get many bills through the Senate that might have died in legislative logjams. In January 1969, as the senior member of the Senate and as one who commanded the admiration and respect of his colleagues, he was elected president pro tem. While no major legislation bears Russell's name, he was very influential in the legislative process over an entire

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Johnson and the Great Society

It was reported that Lyndon Johnson was keenly disappointed when his old friend Dick Russell was not at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington to welcome him when he returned from Dallas as president on the evening of November 22. Later that night, however, Johnson called Russell at his apartment, and they talked for ten minutes about the tragic events in Dallas. Russell was one of the first persons to visit the White House the next day. As the two men sat talking over lunch, Russell kept referring to Johnson as "Mr. President." Finally, somewhat impatiently, Johnson said, "call me Lyndon as you used to. After all we've been together all these years." "No, Mr. President," Russell responded, "now you're the President of the United States. You to me are Mr. President." Such was Russell's abiding respect for the office of the presidency.[1]

Dick Russell was happy to see his old friend in the White House. Indeed, he had worked quietly toward that end since the mid-1950s. He believed that Johnson had all of the talents and abilities to be a strong president, and he told Earl T. Leonard, his press secretary, that "old Lyndon is going to enjoy being president, he'll enjoy every minute of it, every hour of it."

At the same time, a Johnson presidency left Russell with mixed feelings and some obvious concerns. One thing that Russell understood perhaps better than anyone else was Johnson's skill and effectiveness as a political leader. Would Congress, which had failed to pass much of Kennedy's liberal agenda, now respond to Johnson's leadership and enact a host of social and economic measures, including civil rights legislation? Unhappily, Russell believed that would be the case. He wrote a friend on November 26, 1963, that Johnson had recently "gone all out, even further in some respects than President Kennedy, on the racial issue" and intended to press for passage of the "iniquitous" civil rights bill. He warned that the shock over Kennedy's death was no reason to

pass hasty legislation as a kind of memorial to the late president. Russell said that no amount of sympathy for the dead president or high national emotions changed the Constitution.[2] Russell fully realized, however, that the Kennedy mystique and Johnson's "awesome talent for working the Hill," as writer Meg Greenfield phrased it, would result in the passage of many bills that Russell opposed. Senator William Proxmire recalled that after he had once accused Johnson when he was majority leader of usurping Democratic senatorial power, Russell had told Proxmire in the cloakroom that his position reminded him of the story of the bull who charged a locomotive. "That was the bravest bull I ever saw," Russell said, "but I can't say a lot for his judgment." With a man of such demonstrated political power in the White House, and one who was committed so fully to civil rights, it was folly to think that a strong bill would not be passed. That was not a pleasant prospect for Dick Russell.[3]

The first few days of the Johnson administration were hectic for Russell. Besides all of his regular duties, he was on the telephone with Johnson or at the White House almost daily. He had lunch with the president again on November 26 when presumably they talked about Russell serving on the committee to investigate the Kennedy assassination. This was followed by numerous White House briefings for congressional leaders, including meetings on both December 9 and 10. On December 11, Mrs. Johnson invited Russell to dinner, along with Senator George Smathers, the Talmadges, and "the pretty young wife" of an absent Texas congressman. When Jane McMullan, one of Russell's secretaries, asked Lady Bird if it would be a black tie affair, she replied, "Oh, no honey, you know my husband better than that." It was hard for Russell to find any time for quiet or relaxation. When he went to Winder on December 22 to spend a few days at home over Christmas, his phone was ringing with calls from the White House even before he arrived.[4]

Russell had had his first problem with the president before he left town for Christmas vacation. Johnson had moved quickly to set up a commission to investigate the Kennedy assassination, and he wanted Russell to serve as one of the seven members. The senator politely declined. Johnson pleaded with his friend to accept the appointment by stressing their close friendship and emphasizing how much he needed Russell on the commission. But Russell was adamant. He had a number of reasons for refusing the president's request. One factor was the lack of time. He argued that there would not be enough time to attend to his regular Senate duties and also be present at the commission's hearings.

His current schedule, he explained, bordered "on the impossible." Russell did not like to undertake any task unless he could do it well. Moreover, he did not relish the idea of serving with Chief Justice Earl Warren who would be chairman of the commission. Russell believed that Warren had destroyed the integrity of the Supreme Court, and he had been one of the chief justice's sharpest critics ever since the *Brown* decision nearly a decade earlier. Perhaps more important was the fact that Russell knew his main task in the immediate months ahead would be to fight the impending civil rights legislation. That would take a tremendous amount of time and effort.

Johnson, however, paid no attention to Russell's protests. As Russell explained to his old friend Charles Bloch, the president was "so insistent, I simply could not refuse." When Johnson announced the commission members on Friday afternoon, November 29, Russell's name was included. Russell later told a constituent that he had been "conscripted on the Commission."[5] He was at at least two other executive sessions 1/27 + 9/15

Russell attended the commission's organizational meeting and heard the first two witnesses testify. However, he did not have the time to attend many of the meetings. He kept up with the hearings, however, by reading "every line of testimony."[6] Russell made no secret of the fact that serving on the commission was most unpleasant. In February 1964, there were even rumors that he might resign from the commission. The rumors proved correct—at least he tried to resign.

On February 24, he wrote the president a long letter reminding him of his reluctance to serve on the commission and outlining the problems he was experiencing in trying to fulfill his responsibilities as a member of that body. He had been able to devote so little time to those duties, he told Johnson, that he felt like a part-time member. Moreover, Russell was miffed because when Robert Oswald, a witness that Russell particularly wanted to hear, testified, his office had not been notified of the meeting time. Russell said that he could not operate efficiently and allocate his time properly under such conditions. In any event, since Russell could not attend a majority of the sessions and also "discharge my legislative duties," he requested the president to accept his "resignation and relieve me of this assignment." Nevertheless, he assured Johnson that he wanted to serve the country and the president in any way he could.[7] In his customary manner, Johnson ignored Russell's request, and the senator continued to give what time he could to the hearings. He revealed on the television program, "Face the Nation," on March 1 that he no longer had any plans to resign and would do his best to get all of the facts to the American people about the tragedy in Dallas.

However intrigued the American people may have been by the unanswered questions surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy, Russell was concerned in late 1963 and early 1964 with what he considered a much greater issue. That was the intensified pressure for civil rights legislation. By means of the filibuster and skillful parliamentary maneuvering, Russell and his few southern supporters had so far been able to defeat what they believed were the worst features of civil rights measures that had been before Congress almost constantly since 1948. Russell had been a master at defending unlimited debate, which in several cases had succeeded in forcing civil rights advocates to drop their bills or to compromise away the strongest features. This had surely been the case in 1957 and 1960.

Since 1938 there had been 11 votes taken in the Senate on cloture in connection with civil rights measures, and Russell had led successful fights against them all. He had also turned back attempts to change the rule so it would have been easier to shut off debate. The last of these fights had been early in February 1963. Following that contest, Senator John Stennis praised Russell for the way he had "maneuvered us through the perilous seas of parliamentary debate" and brought "final victory over the Philistines."[8] How could the southern group have won with only eighteen senators, Stennis had been asked. "My reply was that we did not have eighteen Senators, but that we have seventeen Senators, plus Senator Russell—and that the plus Russell is the thing which makes the difference."

Flattery from a few close friends and colleagues may have been sweet, but it had no effect on the situation regarding civil rights legislation in the congressional session beginning in January 1964. A few weeks earlier, Russell had experienced one of his short, periodic depressions. He felt like giving up the whole fight. Early in October 1963, he had scribbled on a desk pad, "As of today am completely disassociated from any leadership responsibility of our group."[9] Why? The answer was that he could not keep up with so much work, and more important, he said that "too many hearts are not in it who have same priority." Fading commitments from former anti–civil rights activists had surely become a problem and a great discouragement to Russell. As Stennis described the situation early in 1963, all of the six senators who had died in the previous sixteen months "were on our side, but we got the votes of only two of their replacements."

There was no doubt about it—the Senate had been changing. Attitudes and political realities had shifted. Younger senators had been elected, senators who were not chained so firmly to the old ways by

one who would keep Georgia up with the rest of the United States and not "run off to Europe like a sulking school boy."[50]

Some of the more extreme Georgians criticized Russell for not having joined Senator Strom Thurmond who found a new political home in the Republican party. Russell explained that he respected Senator Thurmond but that he had always held office under the Democratic banner and had an obligation to the party. This did not mean, however, that he had to follow every party line. Indeed, Russell had always boasted of his independence. On a more practical note, Russell explained that he could best serve Georgia as a Democrat with his long seniority. He had worked too long and hard, he said, "for valuable public projects and military installations that are now almost vital to the economy of our state to sign them away with one stroke of the pen" by changing parties. He argued that Georgia needed his seniority to protect the state's economic interests.[51]

It was with a kind of stoic resignation that Russell witnessed the landslide victory of Johnson and Humphrey. He blamed most of the more radical tendencies in the party on Humphrey, who, he said, drew all of the "extreme left-wing groups into the Democratic fold." He was still smarting from the drubbing Humphrey and the civil rights forces had given the Southern Bloc a few months earlier. As he put it, "The political wounds inflicted by the overwhelming forces, not only in the Senate, but in the communications media and throughout the land, led by Vice President-Elect Humphrey were still bleeding." And the future looked equally grim. Writing to his close friend and ally, Senator Willis Robertson, shortly after the election, he said that he was not looking forward to the next session of Congress. "They have overtaken and overwhelmed us," he said.[52]

The civil rights fight that demanded so much of Russell's effort between March and June 1964 left him little time for work on the Warren Commission. As mentioned earlier, he did not want to serve, and he resented having to spend time on commission business that he preferred to spend on other matters. Thus he missed many of the hearings, and when he did attend, he seldom asked questions. He was present when John B. Connally testified but was absent when such key figures as J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, and John McCone, head of the CIA, appeared. He continued to read transcripts of the hearings faithfully, however, and his underlining and queries in the margins testify to his careful scrutiny of the testimony. He once said that he had read "until I thought my eyes were going to burn up."[53]

Russell's most active part in the commission's work came in early

I believe Russell pried this session in 9/63

It learned how the FBI has pressured her to say what it wanted her to say

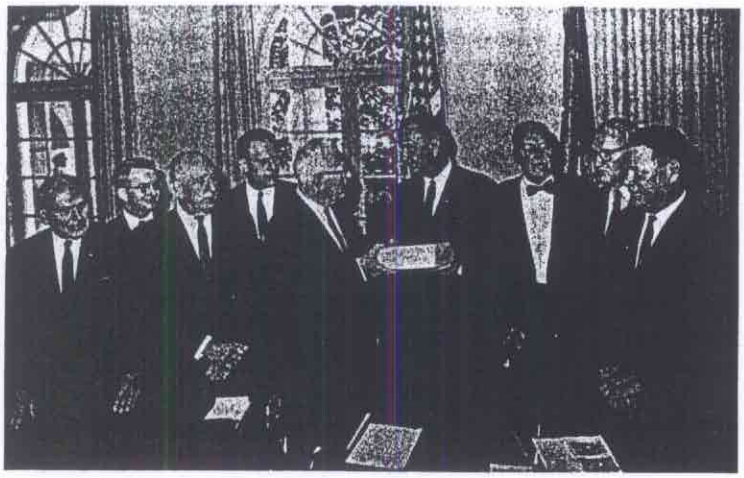
September when he presided as chairman of an informal subcommittee from the commission that went to Dallas to interrogate Marina Oswald again. He had missed Marina's testimony on June 11 when she was questioned by commission members. On Sunday afternoon, September 6, Russell, Senator John Sherman Cooper, Representative Hale Boggs, and a staff member questioned Mrs. Oswald at the U.S. Naval Station in Dallas. Most of Russell's questions dealt with her husband's contacts with agents in Russia and Cuba and with Cubans in the United States. The Russell subcommittee learned little that was not already known.

One of the most interesting aspects of the four-hour hearing in Dallas was Russell's discussion with Marina about her hope to profit financially from her experiences. She was writing her memoirs, and she did not want certain material that had been revealed in the hearings to be published. If her testimony was published in the official government record before she could sell her account of events, those experiences would lose most of their commercial value. She asked Russell if the material that would appear in the published hearings could be confined to that part pertaining to the assassination. This would be up to the full commission, Russell explained, but showing a softheartedness that often came to the fore, Russell said, "I was hoping that you had found some means of commercializing on it [her life story] either to the moving picture people or to the publishing world."[54]

During his short stay in Dallas, Russell traced the route of the Kennedy motorcade and with Representative Boggs went to the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building from which the fatal shot had been fired. Taking a rifle, he leaned out of the window and aimed at the spot where the Kennedy car had been. It would be a difficult hit, Russell said; "Oswald must have been an expert shot." After he returned to Washington, reporters deluged him with requests for interviews and comments. His picture, often with rifle in hand, leaning out of the window, and accompanying stories appeared in newspapers from one end of the country to the other. Russell, however, refused to discuss the substance of Marina's testimony, saying only that "it was nothing startling or shocking."[55]

It was on this that he pried the 9/15 executive session. Rankin double-crossed him & had no court reported present. This deceit destroyed the record of his doubts. Russell thought he was leaving for history. I went into this in Whitewash II

Despite his lack of strong participation in the whole investigation, Russell had considerable influence on the final report. His main change dealt with whether there was a conspiracy between Oswald, Jack Ruby, and possibly unknown parties to kill the president or whether Oswald acted on his own. An early draft of the final report categorically stated that the evidence "indicates that [Oswald] acted alone." Russell insisted that this be changed to "the Commission has found no evidence" that



Warren Commission submits to President Lyndon B. Johnson its final report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, September 27, 1964. Senator Russell is third from left. (Photo courtesy of Russell Memorial Library, University of Georgia, Athens.)

any conspiracy existed. The phrase "has found no evidence" was repeated several times. Russell saw considerable difference in saying that there was no conspiracy, or that Oswald acted alone, and that there was no *evidence* of those things. He did not believe that the commission had all of the information that existed. The commission had no access to evidence that might exist in the Soviet Union or Cuba. Moreover, since Russell was the principal person in the Senate who had oversight of the CIA and possessed secret information others did not have, he may have had reason to suspect some kind of conspiracy. Whatever he knew, if anything, he carried to his grave.[56]

On September 27, the commission released its final report. At the same time, Russell finally agreed to a lengthy interview on the commission's work and findings. While emphasizing that the commission had not turned up any evidence that would establish a conspiracy, Russell said that there were still many unanswered questions. Much of the evidence, he said, was beyond the commission's reach. Nevertheless, he explained that he thought the report was "the very best we could have submitted." He frankly admitted that the debate and speculation over the circumstances of Kennedy's assassination would "continue for a

hundred years or longer." He continued to get mail on the subject, but he left much of it unanswered. He was glad to have the whole thing behind him. When people wrote to him about reopening the investigation, he either ignored them or explained why he did not favor such action.[57]

Nothing much seemed to be going right for Dick Russell in 1964. As if losing the civil rights fight, serving on the Warren Commission, and seeing Hubert Humphrey elected vice president were not enough, he was faced with a flood of legislative proposals that were supposed to produce a Great Society. As we have seen, Russell was not opposed to all social welfare programs. He had supported a good deal of legislation extending the powers of the central government on behalf of those in need. He did strongly object, however, to setting up programs that he considered unnecessary, unworkable, or wasteful. By the mid-1960s, he believed that Congress was passing too much legislation without proper study or consideration of the cost or the long-term consequences. To Russell, Congress had a knee-jerk response to about every demand from a special interest group.

His first difference with the administration came over the Revenue Act of 1964 that passed the Senate in February. This law reduced both individual and corporate tax rates. Russell believed that spending should be cut before taxes were lowered. Lower taxes and increased spending, he said, could only result in further deficits. This seemed totally irresponsible to him. As he had said earlier, that seemed to be the latest Harvard view of economics, but "not having attended Harvard, I take a dim view of this philosophy." Although the bill passed by the large margin of 77 to 21, Russell joined with twenty colleagues and voted no.

In August Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, which included much of the administration's antipoverty program. It was an omnibus measure that provided for a Job Corps on the order of the old Civilian Conservation Corps of New Deal days, work-training programs, loans for low-income farm families, work study for college students, and other help for those in poverty.[58] Russell sympathized with the bill's objectives, but he believed that the legislation was too loosely drawn and would result in huge amounts of waste. His main objection, though, was to the Job Corps. He did not think this program would provide any long-term help to young men and women, and even worse he feared that a large number of northern urban black youth would be sent to southern camps and become a disruptive influence in the region.