Richard Brevard Russell

It was several years ago and the young freshman senator who was paying his courtesy calls on the hierarchs of the Senate believed he had found the perfect line of reasoning to quash any reservations the senior senator from Georgia might have about his election to the Senate at so tender and untried an age. So sitting there in Senator Russell's imposing office, he observed that it was heartening to him to reflect upon the fact that so august a leader as Senator Russell had *himself* first come to the Senate at just about the same age—was that not true? To which Senator Russell —entertained but hardly vanquished by the ploy— replied with a smile, "Yes, it is true. But of course by then I'd already been governor."

It is hard to recall now the sheer span of time and social change that marked the public career of Richard Brevard Russell who died yesterday at the age of 73. And for those who prefer their politics simple and clean—in the manner of a true-or-false exam—it may also prove inconvenient. For to contemplate that career is to face up to its ambiguities and evident contradictions, to acknowledge that a man can be a great public servant and yet have devoted a considerable part of his official life to the promotion of policies and views one finds reprehensible. It is also to acknowledge inconsistency and change, taking account of a host of conflicting impulses and actions. For Senator Russell, a man who had become emblematic to many of resistance to racial justice and nothing more, began his public career and pursued it for many long years as an ardent New Dealer, a champion of the poor and an economic reformer. And there was a time too—quite a stretch of it, in fact, before the present critics got their bearings or their nerve—when Senator Russell, for all his nearness to the military, functioned as its principal taskmaster and watchdog in Congress, scrutinizing its budgets, calling it to account, and expressing misgiving at some of its pretensions and plans.

Certainly, he did none of this in the style of Congress today. But it is well to remember that Senator Russell, as a skeptic concerning the wisdom of our Southeast Asia involvement, was there before practically anyone else. And although he was basically sympathetic to the military, he was also capable of great detachment and objectivity in relation to it. It was Richard Russell, no enthusiast of Harry Truman, who conducted the hearings on the recall of General MacArthur—hearings which are generally regarded as a model of fairness and honest inquiry, and which are pretty universally credited too with having brought under control the explosive domestic situation that prevailed upon the recall of the popular general by the then unpopular President.

Inevitably, all this may seem small beer in the radically altered environment of our time. For there has been kaleidoscopic social, racial and political change over the span of Richard Russell's career, much of it in reaction to old policies and blind assumptions in which he partook, so that he became at once the agent and the victim of a large part of the change he deplored. "The times have passed me by"—it was a favored formulation of his later years, less a complaint than a candid acknowledgment of fact, and it was made especially in relation to the Democratic Party, once— in his aggressive, reforming years—the wellspring of his political life, now a source of bafflement to him.

On his death it might be appropriate to observe that in one sense the times passed Richard Russell by not just as a potential national leader, but also as an archetypal villain for liberaldom. For it is a consequence of our changed consciousness that we, as a political community, now recognize the degree to which racial prejudices and costly foreign policy assumptions for which men like Senator Russell have been ritually castigated, were and are part of the mindset of the populace as a whole—including many of those liberal reformers now trying to set them straight. So a degree of humility might be in order on the occasion of Richard Russell's death. It allows one to contemplate his virtues and achievements, not his faults, and they—the former—were both considerable and very real.