Richard Russell, Senator of Influence

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Richard Brevard Russell of Georgia was the dean of the U.S. Senate by the workings of seniority, but he meant far more to the institution than that. In a real sense, he was the closest thing remaining to the embodiment of the Senate of old, the keeper and the symbol of the tradition, mores and tone that gave the place its stature throughout most of the history of the republic.

Sen. Russell was one of the most influential and in some respects most powerful figures to serve in the body in the 20th century; but his influence and power were largely institutional. They were built on respect, admiration and personal relations, and had little to do with political position or legislative substance. On these matters, the Senate had been out of step with him—or he with it—for many years.

He was never the ringmaster of the Senate, as Lyndon Johnson used to be in his days as Senate Democratic leader, nor the king of the Senate, a title often attributed to the late Robert Kerr of Oklahoma.

Sen. Russell's was a different style of leadership. He was the man who planned the strategy behind the scenes and the man behind the man who was running things. In a sense, he was the high priest of the Senate. A senatorial aide explained several years ago that "He is the man who says the blessing over the legislative wine."

He was a bachelor who lived alone in a small apartment and gave most of his time and energy to the Senate. He is said to have been the only man in history who literally spent more than half his lifetime as a senator of the United States.

For years, he was the Senate's foremost authority on military matters, having been head of the Armed Services Committee from 1951, in the early days of the Korean War, until he relinquished the post to become chairman of the Appropriations Committee in 1969.

United Press International

As Senate dean, Sen. Russell is honored by President Nixon in 1970.

One of his early tasks as Committee chairman was to preside over the joint Armed Services-Foreign Relations inquiry into the dismissal of Gen. Douglas MacArthur as U.S. commander in the Far East. Sen. Russell listened to 2 million words of testimony, nearly three times as many words as are contained in the Bible, and won wide respect for his firm, able and impartial leadership of the inquiry.

While he was Armed Services chairman in the Senate, Rep. Carl Vinson of Georgia was Armed Services chairman in the House. Because of the power of the two chairmen and favorable climate, Georgia became a favorite site for military installations. "One more military base will sink the state," was a favorite Pentagon saying about Georgia during the Russell-Vinson era.

In 1954, Sen. Russell and Sen. Lyndon Johnson, who was his protege and confidant, played important roles in quashing suggestions from the Pentagon and State Department that the United States should intervene on the side of the French in Indochina.

When President Eisenhower decided to send U.S. advisers two years later, Sen. Russell privately warned that "this is the biggest mistake we have ever made." After the policy was set and the Vietnam war began, he supported it in the Senate and asked for bolder, stronger military action to bring it to a rapid conclusion. Once the flag had been committed, he argued with his Southerner's emphasis on honor, there was no choice but to follow through.

Sen. Russell was the leader of the Senate's Southern Democratic bloc which met around a big round table in his office to plan filibusters and other strategems against civil rights measures.

For years, the influence and cohesion of the Southern bloc was such that the Senate was called "the South's revenge for the Civil War." Sen. Russell's leadership of this group gave him added authority and power.

"If Russell had been from Indiana or Missouri or Kentucky, he may very well have been the President of the U.S.," wrote Harry Truman after having served in the White House. "He had the ability, integrity and honesty," Mr. Truman wrote, ". . . but being from Georgia, where the race issue was so heated, he did not have a serious chance."

Nevertheless, Sen. Russell announced as a candidate against Mr. Truman for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1948. Mr. Truman was nominated on the first ballot, but Sen. Russell received 263 convention votes.

The Georgian turned down an offer to run for President on the States Rights ticket that year, and South Carolina's Strom Thurmond took the chance instead. Sen. Russell ran on the regular Democratic ticket for re-election to the Senate, and was credited with keeping Georgia within the regular party fold.

The Senator made a more serious bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1952, when Mr. Truman was preparing to step down. "I used to think that the presidency was the most exalted political office of the earth," he said at the time, "but my humility commenced shrinking very fast after I started looking at the other candidates this year."

Many of his friends believed that he was bitten badly by the presidential bug in 1952, and that his failure to win broad backing contributed to a strain of bitterness that often crept into his pronouncements in later years.

He came to the Senate in 1933, at age 35, to be the youngest member of an august body whose members usually wore morning coats and striped trousers and who rarely addressed one another by their first names.

He had already served as governor of Georgia—again the youngest man in the history of the office—and he came to Washington as a New Dealer.

There were 12 million unemployed, farmers were burning corn for fuel instead of selling it for 10 cents a bushel, and nobody wanted Georgia's cotton. Gov. Russell had seconded the nomination of Franklin D. Roosevelt at the Democratic National Convention in 1932, and he and Mr. Roosevelt were fast friends. They fell out over Roosevelt's plan to pack the U.S. Supreme Court. Russell, whose father had been chief justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia, refused to back the plan.

His biggest disagreement with Presidents, beginning in the Truman era and continuing until recently, was over civil rights. He opposed such bills not merely for political reasons, as some Southern lawmakers did, but passionately and wholeheartedly. He spoke of "treason," "surrender," "appeasement" and "retreat," and thought and spoke of himself as the field general of a hard-pressed army.

When the legislature of Georgia passed an antipoll tax amendment in 1964, Sen. Russell rose on the Senate floor and denounced the action as "a source of humiliation to me" and declared that the lawmakers back home were part of a "pernicious drive to enforce coercion and conformity" on sister states.

Later that year, while battling against a civil rights bill sent up by his old protege Lyndon Johnson, Sen. Russell composed bitter parody of Kipling's poem "What Say the Reeds at Runnymeade?" and read it to an astonished Senate. About

Associated Press

Shortly before his death, Sen. Russell reviews his seven terms in the U.S. Senate.

United Press International

Sen. Russell, a gallant campaigner, kisses the hand of a young admirer.

No ref. to WG.!

the same time he publicly commended the Black Muslim separatism of Cassius Clay and predicted that the boxer would never be invited to the White House "because he is not a believer in forced integration."

All the time, he somehow was able to continue a close personal relationship with Mr. Johnson. Luci and Lynda, the Presidents daughters, called him "Uncle Dick," and he would frequently come to the executive mansion for a quiet supper with the presidential family.

The Senator later said that his relationship with his friend-and-adversary in the White House had probably been "one of the most peculiar in American history." Sen. Russell had pushed Mr. Johnson for the Senate leadership job in the early 1950s and helped him succeed at it later in the decade. When Mr. Johnson became President, Sen. Russell commented, "he has the greatest understanding of political power of any President since Martin Van Buren." They worked together in military and foreign policy matters after the Texan ascended to the presidency, but were almost completely at odds in domestic affairs.

After President Nixon took office, Sen. Russell continued to receive unusual White House attention. In February, 1970, the senator was the honored guest at White House church services conducted by his brother, Dr. Henry Edward Russell of the Second Presbyterian Church of Memphis, Tenn. A few days later Mr. Nixon showed up at a reception for the senator and praised him as "a great leader of this country . . . a man of integrity . . . a fine human being."

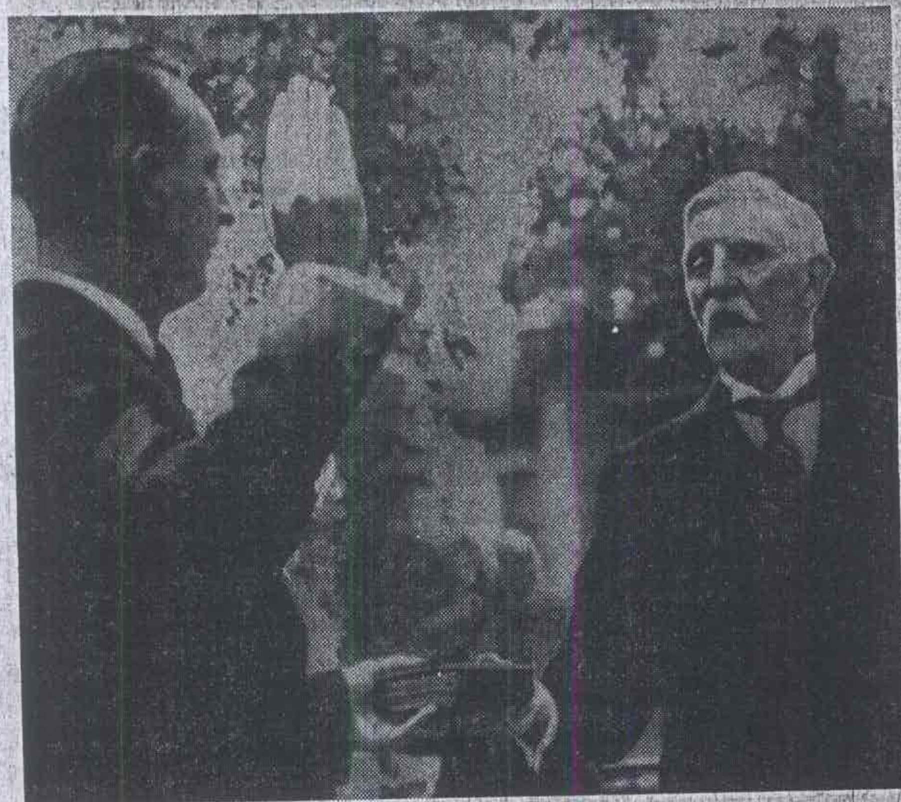
Sen. Russell's greatest pride was in his personal sense of honor, ingrained in him by his Southern forebears, and it was only rarely questioned in the legislative halls. When it was questioned on one occasion several years ago, the senator rose from his chair and declared that "when the time comes for me to go out of this chamber, whether I go voluntarily, whether my commission is revoked by the electorate of Georgia or whether I am carried out in a box, I hope it will at least be possible to say of me that I was an honorable man. I do not know of anything that might be said that would better please me."

Once a heavy smoker who consumed up to three packages of cigarettes daily, Russell suffered for more than a decade from emphysema, a progressive and chronic disease of the lungs. Early in 1969, doctors at Walter Reed Army Hospital also discovered an inoperable tumor on his left lung.

As soon as the finding had been confirmed, Sen. Russell summoned the Washington correspondents for Atlanta newspapers. Sitting at his desk in his office, backed by a fading stars-and-bars flag of his home state, he calmly announced the finding and answered questions. He described the extraordinary announcement as an act of faith with the voters of his home state.

A day or two later he entered Walter Reed for the first of a long series of cobalt treatments to arrest the tumor. "I know I've got a hard fight ahead," he said from his hospital bed, "but if I don't make it, I've been privileged to be around here in high places for the most eventful 30 years in human history and to know some of the great men of history and to have some small share in what was done.

"I'm going to try to make it," he said, "but if not, I'll have no regrets."



United Press International

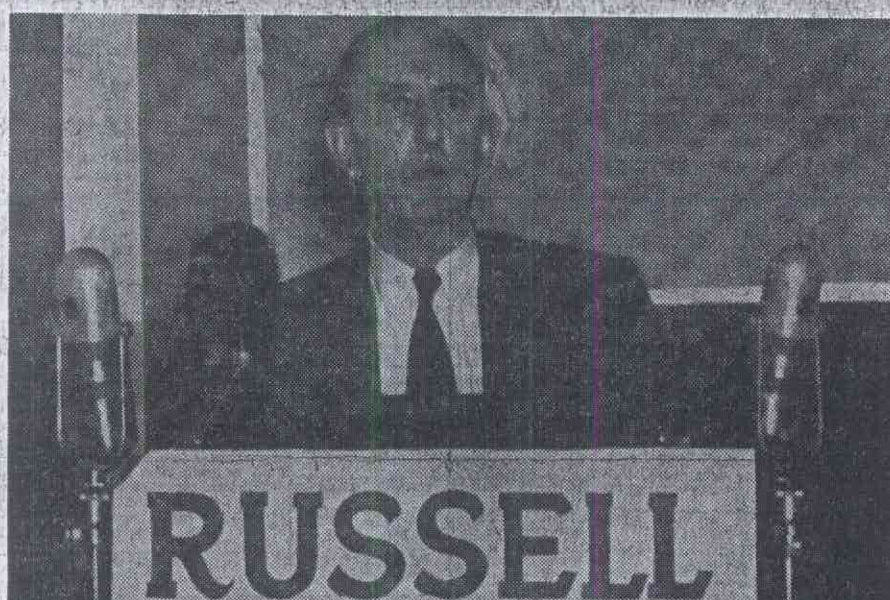
Sworn in as Georgia governor in 1931 by his father, Judge Richard B. Russell Sr.

The Washington Post

Talks with his Senate colleague of 24 years from Georgia, Sen. George.

Associated Press

Discusses 1951 draft bill with his protege, Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson.



United Press International

Campaigns for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1952.

Harris-Ewing

As chairman of MacArthur dismissal inquiry confers with Knowland.

Associated Press

Debates with Sen. Kefauver in bid for Presidential nomination in 1952.