

Who Is Senator Byrd?

By ADAM YARMOLINSKY

The great bulk of the reporting on the surprising result of the contest for Senate whip has focused on the man who lost the contest. Not nearly enough attention has been paid to the man who won, and what his victory says about the Democratic party in the United States Senate.

Robert C. Byrd, the junior Senator from West Virginia, is so dimly perceived by some of his colleagues that four of the folded paper ballots came out spelled "Bird." Confusion about his present identity is helped by the public reputation of Senator Harry Byrd, sometime Democrat, and scion of the Byrd dynasty of Virginia. Because Robert Byrd is not one of the Byrds, he tends to fade into the background.

But Robert Byrd's record in the Senate is clear and consistent. In the 1970 session, he voted for the Haynsworth and Carswell nominations, for the "no-knock" provision in the anti-crime bill, for the SST, for the ABM, against the McGovern-Hatfield resolution on withdrawal from Vietnam, and against cloture on electoral reform.

For he has become a man of the Right only recently. His conservative coalition score has hovered around the 60 per cent mark in his voting in the previous three sessions. He voted against cloture on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and delivered himself of a fifteen-hour speech during the filibuster.

When he was Chairman of the District of Columbia subcommittee of the State Appropriations Committee, during the '60's, he made frequent headlines by badgering local welfare officials about the vigor of their efforts to enforce the man-in-the-house rule, and he regularly opposed efforts to end to the District the optional program that allows welfare payments to children while the male breadwinner receives job training. His principal objection to the 1964 anti-poverty legislation was that it might permit District of Columbia welfare agencies to benefit from some volunteer help from proposed VISTA volunteer corps.

Byrd was a leader in the fight over restrictive amendments to the 1967 Welfare Act Extension, when the conference report containing the compulsory work provisions for welfare recipients was adopted, on his motion, by yeas and nays vote, with only a haul of Senators on the Senate floor. Last Dec. 31, in a speech castigating the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, he accused it "actually encouraging people to get welfare." To make poor people

His Secret Victory Dooms the Liberal Side in the Senate

aware of their right to assistance is apparently enough to win the enmity of the junior Senator from West Virginia.

Byrd has been heard to boast that his hard-line racial attitudes are not determined by his constituency, but are his personal views. If he has not been a friend of minorities, he has consistently been a minority Democrat. On the Hart-Cooper amendment curtailing the ABM, on the Proxmire amendment to withhold funds for the SST, on the McGovern-Hatfield resolution, he was in the minority of Democratic Senators who joined with a majority of Republicans on each of these measures.

Thirty-one members of the Senate Democratic caucus cast their secret ballots last week for Robert C. Byrd. Excluding the Eastlands and the Russell Longs and the death watch proxy from Senator Russell, a dozen of these men must have been Senators who are not known as members of the conservative coalition. The public reputations of these Senators are built on the repudiation of everything that Robert Byrd stands for.

They knew what kind of man he is, yet they counted on the country not knowing. Their private bargains and rationalizations are of only minor interest. But what they were doing to the future of their party is not unimportant.

The blow to the Democratic party is very real and serious. Public confidence in political leadership is at a particularly low ebb. It can be argued, and it has been, that the post of party whip is an unimportant one, and the choice of a Senator for that post is an unimportant choice. Yet no party, and least of all the opposition party today, can afford to let pass an occasion to demonstrate that it stands for a set of political principles, and that it will place them above political squabbles for petty spoils.

Robert Byrd was able to garner votes in part because no one saw him as a rival for party leadership; that leadership needs to think about the value of what it bargained away.

Adam Yarmolinsky, of the Harvard law school and Kennedy Institute of Politics, served in the Defense Department under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.