

## **ROBERT C. BYRD**

### **EARLY LIFE**

Robert C. Byrd, West Virginian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one of the most influential members of the United States Senate, began his life with a different name. The future senator was born Cornelius Calvin Sale, Jr. on November 20, 1917, in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. His parents, Cornelius and Ada Sale, had four other children—three boys and one girl. The United States was engaged in World War I when Cornelius Sale, Jr. was born. The day the armistice was signed ending the war, November 11, 1918, the youngster's mother died of influenza. The death of his mother changed the life of her youngest child forever.

Before her death, Ada Sale asked her husband to give their sons to other family members. According to her wishes, young Cornelius was given to his mother's sister and her brother-in-law, Vlurma and Titus Byrd. The Byrds, who had no children of their own, adopted the baby and changed his name to Robert Carlyle Byrd. The Byrd family moved to West Virginia when young "Robert" was about two years old. Because he left North Carolina, Robert was an adult before he met his siblings.

The senator's earliest memories are of living in Bluefield where his adoptive father drove a wagon and team for a local brewery. Seeking a better life, Titus Byrd moved his family to McDowell County where he landed a job as a coal miner. The Byrds returned to Mercer County and settled in Algonquin (later called Lamar). It was here that young Robert started to school. He attended a two-room school and finished four grades in two years. School became an important part of Byrd's life. By now a life-long learner, his thirst for knowledge began to shape his life.

While living in Algonquin, Byrd's "mother" took in boarders to supplement the family income. One of the boarders talked frequently of his life on a farm on Wolf Creek. Intrigued with these appealing stories, Titus Byrd decided to leave the mines and try his luck as a farmer.

The family bought a small farm on Wolf Creek and, while living there, young Robert attended another two-room school. The Byrd house, which was near the head of a hollow, had no electricity, indoor running water or telephone. As Abraham Lincoln made do with light from a fireplace, Robert pursued his love of learning with the light of an oil lamp. In the summer the youngster hoed corn, bugged beans, milked cows, and peddled chickens, eggs and vegetables. Although the family worked hard, they could barely make a living, so Titus Byrd returned to the mines.

Hoping to earn enough money to pay off the loan on the farm, Titus moved the family to Stotesbury in Raleigh County. In Stotesbury Robert brought in the wood and coal and recalled stopping by neighbors' houses to collect scraps of food to feed the hogs. Once the farm was paid off, the family returned to Wolf Creek. Robert, now in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, again walked three miles to get an education. This time he walked three miles to catch a bus, and then traveled four more miles to a school in Spanishburg.

With all the moving the family did, Robert eventually graduated from Mark Twain High School in Stotesbury. Many things happened to him while attending Mark Twain, but two of the most important were that he met his future wife and he developed an interest in music. Local fiddlers and banjo players often played in town on Friday evenings and Robert loved to listen to them. He decided that he, too, would like to play the violin, so Titus took him to Beckley and bought him a violin. Robert was to reflect in his later life that he was not given toys. Instead, his parents bought him books and watercolors – and a violin. Robert played the violin in the school orchestra and the bass drum in the band. His interest in music would play a major role in his future political career.

Robert was the valedictorian of his graduating class of twenty-eight students. He always worked hard and did his best in school. Byrd had a good memory and loved history and mathematics. His heroes were statesmen and soldiers of the founding period, such as George Washington, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin and Francis Marion.

## THE VALUE OF HARD WORK AND PERSEVERENCE

After graduating from high school, Robert wanted to go to college, but without money that was not possible. Graduating in the middle of the depression also made getting a job difficult. Eight months after his graduation Byrd finally took a job in a gas station in Helen, some four miles from his home. He began the job in January, the middle of the winter. He did not have a car or even an overcoat to keep warm. If he had to walk to Helen, he borrowed a coat; other times he hitched rides. Robert worked from 6:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. On many days he walked a total of eight miles to and from work.

After a short time, Byrd was offered a job as produce boy with the Koppers Company in his hometown. The Koppers Company owned the coal operation in Stotesbury as well as the gas station in Helen. Robert was happy to change jobs because he would no longer have to travel several miles to work.

While a student at Mark Twain High School, Byrd was attracted to a young woman who was a grade behind him. Erma Ora James was a coal miner's daughter. In fact, her father, Fred James, was one of the miners who played the fiddle on Friday evenings.

Robert had a unique way of courting Erma. A fellow student would often bring candy to school, and Byrd made it a point to be one of the first students to greet his friend each morning, hoping to be offered some of the sweet treats. When the offer was extended, Robert graciously accepted, but not for himself. He promptly sought out Erma James and gave the candy to her. Thus, Robert courted his sweetheart with another person's sweets.

While Robert worked at the gas station in Helen, he did not have much time to see Erma; but once he became a produce boy in the company store, the couple was able to spend more time together. When they decided to get married in 1937, Robert was earning \$75 a month. After their wedding, the newlyweds lived in two upstairs rooms in the coal camp house of Erma's sister and brother-in-law. The first of the Byrd's two daughters, Mona, was born while they lived in those two rooms.

Robert, like his father, always looked for ways to make a better living. He taught himself the art of cutting meat by watching and helping the meat cutter who worked in the Koppers Company store. He also read a manual to learn more about the process. After acquiring this skill, Byrd worked as a meat cutter at a number of stores in Fayette and Raleigh Counties. It was during this period of his life that a second daughter, Marjorie, was born.

While working as a meat cutter, Byrd took classes in welding at Beckley College. During World War II he used this skill to build cargo ships, known as victory or liberty ships, in Baltimore, Maryland and Tampa, Florida. But when the war ended in 1945, the Byrds returned to Crab Orchard where Robert again worked at the Carolina supermarket.

## ENTERING POLITICS AT THE STATE LEVEL

Robert C. Byrd, the only West Virginian to serve in both houses of the state legislature and both houses of the United States Congress, became interested in state government while he was working in Crab Orchard. In 1946 he decided to run for the West Virginia House of Delegates. In the campaign, the political newcomer faced fierce competition from twelve other people, including three incumbents.

Robert had no previous political experience, but he learned a great deal in his very first political campaign. Besides being a newcomer to politics, he still could not drive an automobile. Therefore, he had to rely on a friend to drive him to meetings as well as around the county so he could meet the voters. Another disadvantage was that he had no name recognition. Since he was an unknown in political circles, he soon realized that he needed a gimmick to attract attention and make himself recognizable. His gimmick became his violin. Byrd took the violin everywhere and at meetings offered to play a couple of tunes before giving his speech. The gimmick worked! He became so well known that when the results of the election came in Byrd led the ticket.

Shortly before his reelection to the West Virginia House of Delegates in 1948, Robert and Erma opened their own grocery store in Sophia. When Robert was in Charleston, Erma operated their small business. In his second term in the House, Byrd again turned his attention to education. To embark on his dream of a college education, he enrolled at Morris Harvey College (now the University of Charleston). He continued his college studies, taking classes at Concord and Marshall Colleges (now Marshall University).

In 1950 Byrd decided to vacate his seat in the House of Delegates and run for the state Senate. He was elected to the office, but about half way through his first term in the state Senate, one of West Virginia's representatives in the United States House of Representatives decided not to run for reelection. This opened up a seat in Byrd's Congressional district. The new Senator decided if he ever was to serve his state at the national level, this was the time.

## EMERGING ONTO THE NATIONAL SCENE

The Congressional election of 1952 proved to be one of the most trying times Robert Byrd would ever know. He was pressured to take sides in the state's gubernatorial race, but he knew that to do so would hinder his chances to be elected to Congress. Because he refused to take sides, he was not invited to political gatherings. Focused and determined to win the election, Byrd did not let the lack of an invitation stop him from attending rallies. He would just show up, usually with his violin in hand. At one such gathering, after the meeting was adjourned without his being allowed to speak, Byrd and two friends began to play some favorite musical selections—songs like “Turkey in the Straw” and “Cripple Creek.” Soon, a large number of people began to make their way back into the meeting room. Robert and his friends continued to play and, when a crowd was assembled, he gave his speech.

The second thing that made the campaign of 1952 so difficult was the resurgence of a story of Byrd's past membership in the Ku Klux Klan. He had joined the Klan in the early 1940s because of its stand against Communism, a doctrine that he firmly opposed. The story first surfaced before the primary election and, in characteristic style, Byrd faced the issue head on. He addressed the Klan issue honestly, openly acknowledged his involvement and the reasons for it. He admitted he had made a mistake. The voters appreciated his honesty and he won his party's nomination by a large margin. During the campaign before the general election, the story resurfaced. This time a letter that Byrd had written to the Imperial Wizard of the Klan, asking that the organization be revived in West Virginia, was made public. He had written this letter in 1946, later than the period of time he acknowledged association with the Klan. Governor Okey Patterson asked Robert to withdraw from the race, but he refused. Again, he accepted the challenge, confronted the issue head on and won the election. His willingness to face issues in a straightforward manner would become a pattern throughout his political career. Byrd resigned from the West Virginia Senate and went to Washington, D.C. to begin his illustrative service at the national level.

Byrd served six years in the House of Representatives. He did not gain much seniority during that time, and as a member of the minority party, did not enjoy much support from the House leadership. He spent his time working in his Congressional district, getting to know people and learning what issues his constituents favored. During his second term in the House, however, Byrd was assigned to the Foreign Affairs Committee. As a member of this committee, he traveled overseas for the first time.

While serving in the House, Byrd did initiate a personal goal—earning a law degree. In 1953 he enrolled in night classes at George Washington University's School of Law. He transferred to American University's Washington College of Law after learning that George Washington would not confer a law degree because he lacked the prerequisite baccalaureate degree. Byrd worked on his law degree for the next ten years, completing it as a member of the United States Senate in 1963. When the commencement speaker, then President John F. Kennedy, conferred the degree, he remarked that Robert C. Byrd was the only person to begin and complete the requirements for a law degree while serving as a member of Congress.

## THE SENATE YEARS

In 1958, Robert Byrd decided to run for the United States Senate. He saw the Senate as a means of doing more for the whole state of West Virginia. This campaign was especially difficult because special interest groups, like the United Mine Workers, had already expressed support for another candidate, William C. Marland, a former governor. Byrd received a message from John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, telling him not to run for the Senate. This message only furthered Byrd's determination not only to run, but also to win the office. Tensions were relieved when a second seat opened up with the death of Senator Matthew Neely. Marland announced for the vacant seat, eliminating a confrontation with Byrd. John L. Lewis could now support Marland and Byrd in their quests for Senate seats. Byrd won his seat, defeating Chapman Revercomb to become the 1,579<sup>th</sup> person to serve in the Senate since its beginning in 1789. The other Senate seat went to Jennings Randolph.

As a new senator, Byrd soon became friends with some of the nation's most powerful leaders—among them, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson and Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee Carl Haden. As a freshman senator, Robert received a unique honor when he was appointed to the Appropriations Committee.

Byrd became a strong supporter of Lyndon Johnson, but the senator for whom he perhaps developed the greatest respect was Richard Russell of Georgia. He referred to Russell as the “father” of the Senate, primarily because he was known for his knowledge of rules and precedents. Byrd believed that knowing rules and precedents was power. His creative interpretation of Senate rules has helped him obtain passage or rejection of a number of bills, perhaps one of the best known returning the Panama Canal to Panama.

Byrd has served continuously in the Senate since 1959. During that time he has held more leadership positions than any other senator in history. Some of the positions of leadership include Secretary of the Democrat Conference, Majority Whip, Majority Leader, President Pro Tempore, and Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Byrd has also cast more votes than any other senator.

Byrd is often called the “soul of the Senate” because of his vast knowledge of its history and his obvious affection and respect for the government institution. He is considered by his colleagues to be the custodian of the Senate's values and ideals. He provides orientation to all newly elected senators and, in 1989, published a four-volume history of the Senate.

## UPHOLDING THE CONSTITUTION

Robert C. Byrd has as much love and respect for the Constitution as he does the Senate. He has said that the United States Constitution is the only one of its kind ever written. The Constitution is important today because it provides our government with three distinct divisions—executive, legislative, and judicial—each of which is equal to the others. Byrd believes the problem with the Constitution is that people do not know much about it. Even within the Senate he sees fellow senators who show what he terms too much political partisanship, something that is not mentioned in the Constitution. He decries people who view the chief executive's role as more important than the framers of the Constitution intended it to be. As a result, he has had differences with many presidents, regardless of political affiliations.

Two recent examples of differences with chief executives were his opposition to the line-item veto under President Bill Clinton and his reluctance to give President George W. Bush the power to declare war. President Clinton supported a bill to give the president the ability to cancel specific items in spending and tax bills. This was known as the line-item veto because the president could choose the particular items he wanted to delete. Byrd opposed the line-item veto, citing the Constitution, which stated that bills must be presented to the president in the form in which they were passed. The president then had to accept or reject the bills in their entirety. The line-item veto was passed with Byrd's opposition, but in 1998 the Supreme Court, exercising its authority of judicial review, declared the law unconstitutional. This vindicated Byrd's position in regard to the language of the Constitution.

After the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, Byrd was concerned that Congress was handing over its Constitutional right to declare war to President George W. Bush. He favored an anti-terrorist response to the attacks, but he maintained Congress alone had the Constitutional power to declare war. He further contended that Congress did not have the authority to surrender that constitutional duty to the president. In response to the power given the President to initiate military action in Iraq in March, 2003, Byrd quoted Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, which grants Congress the power to declare war and call forth the militia "to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrection and repel Invasions." He emphatically pointed out that nowhere is it written in the Constitution that the president has the authority to call forth the militia to preempt a perceived threat.

Another area where Byrd believes the executive branch infringed on the power of the legislative branch was with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. He opposed this agreement because, again, he believed it gave powers to the executive branch that were reserved to Congress by the Constitution. He charged that the agreement gives future presidents "carte blanche" to negotiate and determine what will be contained in trade agreements, and, according to the Constitution, only Congress has the power to regulate commerce. He said that this act prevents the Senate, as representatives of the people, from exercising its constitutional responsibility to reject or modify trade agreements, which is not in the best interest of the American people.

Byrd stands by the principle that "as long as this country shall stand, we should uphold the Constitution." So he will continue to fight for separation of powers as provided in the

Constitution. He will fight against any bill that is not in keeping with the intent of the founding fathers.

## A MAN OF VISION

Robert C. Byrd has been classified as a conservative when it comes to preserving and perpetuating all that is time tested and good in the American system, but he is labeled a progressive in favor of change when change is needed.

When he became Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, he said he welcomed the challenge afforded him because it gave him the opportunity to become West Virginia's leading industry. He has certainly done that – bringing billions of federal dollars into the state. Many of the projects for which he has secured funding have preserved the past. Others, however, show that he keeps abreast of current technologies and their impact on economic development.

Byrd recognized that if West Virginia wanted to move from coal to a high tech economy the state needed to build an infrastructure—better water, sewage facilities and roads. He worked in Congress to secure funding for these projects and many more. He has been instrumental in bringing high tech industries to West Virginia. He also has secured funding for high tech educational opportunities for young people, especially in the areas of biometrics and health care.

Robert C. Byrd rose from poverty to become a powerful force in United States government. He has said that he became a senator in order to serve all West Virginians and he has been true to his word. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., in describing Robert Byrd has said, “His number one priority has always been the people of West Virginia. It has been a great example for all of us to never lose sight of the fact that you are elected by the people from your state and the people from your state should have priority.” Byrd made it a priority early in his career to determine what issues West Virginians believed were important. As a result, he has focused much of his time and energy in Congress on issues to improve the quality of life, education, health care, transportation and employment. While working in the Senate, he has accomplished great things, doing what he believes is right and not compromising his integrity. Retired Senator Sam Nunn, D-Ga., has said of Byrd, “It has been said that great men are like eagles. You find them one at a time, soaring alone, using their skill and their strength to reach new horizons. Such a man is Robert Byrd.” All one has to do is look anywhere in the state to see the realization of his efforts. Many people call him the West Virginian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.