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Robert Byrd: A story of change and redemption

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By Eugene Robinson
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"End of an era" is an overused trope, but in this case it's appropriate: The last of the old Southern Democrats is gone.

Sen. Robert Byrd had long since repented, of course. The [West Virginian, who died Monday at 92](#), deeply regretted his segregationist past, which included a year as a member of the Ku Klux Klan and at least several more years as a Klan sympathizer. He eventually became a passionate advocate for civil rights, and he was one of the most vocal supporters of legislation making the birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. a national holiday.

But that was after Byrd's personal enlightenment. Amid what is sure to be a flood of heartfelt encomiums to his lifetime of public service, it is important to note that his is a story of change and redemption -- and that Byrd and his party had a shameful past to overcome.

In Byrd's first campaign for the House in 1952, his opponent released a letter that Byrd had written to the Klan's imperial wizard in 1946. The date is important because Byrd claimed to have cut ties with the racist organization -- today we would call it a terrorist group -- in 1943. "The Klan is needed today as never before, and I am anxious to see its rebirth here in West Virginia," Byrd wrote.

This was in the days when the South was a solid Democratic stronghold -- and when the default position of Southern Democrats was to advocate separation of the races. In 1964, Byrd joined other members of his party, led by Richard Russell of Georgia, in trying to kill the Civil Rights Act. Back then, would-be obstructionists were required to stage a filibuster rather than just threaten one. Byrd held the Senate floor for 14 hours in an effort that was ultimately as futile as [Pickett's Charge](#).

"Men are not created equal today, and they were not created equal in 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was written," Byrd declaimed during his peroration. "Men and races of men differ in appearance, ways, physical power, mental capacity, creativity and vision."

Byrd also opposed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and most of Johnson's anti-poverty programs, saying that "we can take the people out of the slums, but we cannot take the slums out of the people."

From 1961 to 1969, Byrd chaired a Senate subcommittee that had vast authority over local affairs in the District of Columbia. He supported more federal funding for local services but also angered local

activists with a high-profile crusade to remove ineligible recipients from the welfare rolls.

"His tongue was smoother than butter," recalled the Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy, the District's first nonvoting representative in Congress, "but war was in his heart." That martial spirit was evident in 1968 when riots broke out after King's assassination. "If it requires the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, we should put the troublemakers in their places," Byrd said. Well, he did have a way with words.

Byrd's trajectory -- from bitter segregationist to beloved dean of the Senate -- is actually a hopeful, quintessentially American story. He was a man of his age, and his views on race closely tracked the views of the constituents he so loyally represented. There was a time when separate-but-unequal was a mainstream position among whites in the South, and the fact that Byrd's early words and deeds are so shocking today is a testament to how far the nation has come.

Byrd's career is also a reminder that no political party has a monopoly on wisdom or virtue. It was Southern Democrats who tried desperately to deny equal rights to African Americans, and it was the votes of Northern Republicans that helped pass the landmark legislation. Southern whites switched parties and made the South a GOP bastion. This has been the situation for decades now -- but it won't last forever.

Last week, in my home state of South Carolina, an African American named [Tim Scott defeated Strom Thurmond's son in the Republican primary for a seat in the House](#). The [GOP nomination for governor was won by Nikki Haley](#), who is of Indian descent and was called a "raghead" by one of her good ol' boy critics. In Alabama, [Rep. Artur Davis failed to become the first African American to win the Democratic nomination for governor](#) -- largely because he took the African American vote for granted.

Robert Byrd's amazing career reminds us that times really do change. And so do people.

The writer will be [online to chat with readers](#) at 1 p.m. Eastern time Tuesday. Submit your questions and comments before or during the discussion.

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