Ralph Yarbrough of Texas and the Road to Civil Rights

Ernest M.B. Obadele-Starks
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In 1964 United States Senator Ralph W. Yarborough of Texas broke with Southern tradition and voted in favor of the Civil Rights Act. He was the only Southern senator from the eleven original secessionist states to cast a yea vote for the Act. Between 1957 and 1964 debate over legislation to extend civil rights beyond public transportation and public education grew increasingly intense. A study of Senator Yarborough offers historians a unique perspective on this critical period in United States history and produces a first-hand account of the forces shaping the critical transition from the Civil Rights Act of 1957 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A study of Yarborough can assist one in formulating a comparative analysis of his account and the account of other historians and policymakers relative to the civil rights era. As a Southern liberal in favor of civil rights, Yarborough offers a sharp contrast to the more conservative Southern senators who opposed civil rights legislation.

Unlike Yarborough, most Southern senators followed the traditional politics of their region and rejected the measure. The spirit of this tradition is reflected in the Southern Manifesto. Reacting to the Brown v. Topeka (1954) decision, nineteen senators and twenty-seven representatives from eleven Southern states signed the Manifesto, a clear political declaration of war on desegregation and civil rights. This decree, issued in 1956, stated:

We pledge ourselves to use all lawful means to bring about the reversal of this decision which is contrary to the constitution and to prevent the use of force in its implementation. In this trying period, as we all seek to right this wrong, we appeal to our people not to be provoked by the agitators and troublemakers invading our states and to scrupulously refrain from disorder and lawless acts.¹

Many policymakers from Texas followed the lead of other Southern politicians and signed the Manifesto. In the United States House of Representatives, Wright Patman, John Dowdy, Walter Rogers, and O.C. Fisher signed the declaration. In the Senate, Price Daniel did so. Contrary to his Southern colleagues, Yarborough refused to sign. When the civil rights issue became a central concern at the national level, he said:

The Southern Senators signed the Manifesto. When I got elected, they wrote me ... some of them ... to come join them. I wasn’t about to ... They got mad as hell that I wouldn’t sign the Manifesto ... Hell, I wasn’t for it.²

Yarborough’s liberal mindset can be attributed partially to his East Texas heritage. Born in Chandler, Texas, a small town of approximately 500 people in Henderson County, Yarborough recalls the relationship between

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blacks and whites as a relatively good one. Although his region was segregated, Yarborough suggests that:

there was not a hard feeling between the blacks and the whites ... it was a rural town that was solely farming and it boasted never a lynching ... it was a different feeling between the blacks and the whites than it was on the other side of the river.4

For several years, Yarborough was a key figure in Texas politics. His initial encounter with public office came with his appointment as an assistant attorney general in 1930. Yarborough's primary responsibility was to manage the state school fund.3 In 1936 Yarborough was appointed to a state judgeship in the 53rd District Court, and later was elected to a four-year term.6 His leadership on the bench and his commitment to equal justice earned him respect and also increased his visibility in public life.7 In 1938, Yarborough decided to campaign for the attorney general's office. Although he was defeated, the experience of campaigning and the public attention he received were valuable to his political career.8 Then World War II temporarily interrupted his public life. The outbreak of the war prompted Yarborough to enlist in the United States Army. His stint in the military took him to the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia, and eventually to the South Pacific.9

Following the war, Yarborough returned to politics and challenged Allan Shivers for governor in 1952. Unlike Shivers, the "Yarborough Coalition" included small farmers of East Texas, workers in small factories and in the larger industries of major cities, small businessmen, officials of college campuses, leaders of labor unions, teacher organizations, the poor, Mexicans, and African Americans. Yarborough contends that the "bait-and-switch," mudslinging, and character assassination tactics of Shivers eventually cost him the race.10 Yarborough's loss, however, did not destroy his spirit to win the governorship, and in 1954, he challenged Shivers for a second time.

A central issue in the governor's race in 1954 was desegregation. Shivers attacked Yarborough by claiming that the East Texan's campaign was financed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and that the N.A.A.C.P. was "boastfully declaring it was going to end segregation in social activities and in every phase of daily living -- and quickly." Shivers' objective was to get Yarborough to commit to a stand on segregation. Yarborough responded to Shivers' attack by asserting that he was for "a free choice" but was not in favor of the "forced mingling of children where they don't want to go."11 Yarborough's assertion may lead one to believe that he was pro-segregation. Since busing was not a major concern during the late 1950s, in retrospect, Yarborough's position on forced integration was influenced by the politics of the times. Supporting equal public education, Yarborough could attract the attention of the African American community and by rejecting forced integration he could avoid alienation of the white community.12

Yarborough's unsuccessful bid for the governorship led him to seek a
Yarborough’s implications of Johnson’s opportunistic change from an anti-civil rights record to a positive stance is supported amply in the writings of contemporaries and historians in their interpretation of the Texas politician. Booth Mooney, Johnson’s former assistant and speech writer, contends that Johnson exhausted most of his energies in uniting opposing forces of the Civil Rights Bill, and for several weeks remained silent on his position until he was able to appease both opponents and proponents of the measure before
publicly stating his position. There can be little argument, however, that Johnson had a keen political mind and did not hesitate to use it, particularly on issues relating to civil rights legislation. And the Yarborough and Johnson combination greatly impacted national legislation on civil rights.¹⁸

By 1959, the civil rights phase of the African-American freedom struggle, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was coming of age. The political popularity of Ralph Yarborough and Johnson intensified. The Senate Judiciary Committee continued to hear opposing and supporting arguments on a new civil rights bill. By July of that year, the Committee approved a new measure which was designed to enhance the power of the Civil Rights Commission and the attorney general.¹⁹ The Judiciary Committee’s approval of the bill was unusual, since in the past it had circumvented reporting civil rights legislation to the full Senate. Fearing it would not pass at the committee level, Johnson and Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois proposed that the full Senate debate the new legislation.²⁰ On March 29, 1960, Johnson initiated a Senate debate on the new Civil Rights Bill, and later that year the full Senate debated and passed the measure.²¹ An extension of the previous act, the new law reinforced the right of citizens to vote and also reaffirmed the authority of the Civil Rights Commission to investigate civil rights violations. It failed, however, to provide adequate legal protection for citizens in public accommodations and public transportation.²² Yarborough and Johnson, as in 1957, voted in favor of the Civil Rights Act of 1960, and as a result of their actions were labeled as “double-crossers” of traditional Southern politics by other Southerns.²³

| OLD CONFEDERACY SENATORS CIVIL RIGHTS VOTE IN 1960 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Alabama         | Sparkman (No)   | Hill (DNV) |
| Arkansas        | Fulbright (No)  | McClellan (No) |
| Florida         | Holland (No)    | Smathers (No) |
| Georgia         | Russell (No)    | Talmadge (No) |
| Louisiana       | Ellender (No)   | Long (No) |
| Mississippi     | Eastland (No)   | Stennis (No) |
| North Carolina  | Ervin (No)      | Jordon (No) |
| South Carolina  | Johnston (No)   | Thurmond (No) |
| Tennessee       | Gore (Yes)      | Kefauver (Yes) |
| *Texas          | Johnson (Yes)   | Yarborough (Yes) |
| Virginia        | Byrd (No)       | Robertson (No) |

Although Yarborough and Johnson consistently voted for civil rights legislation after 1957, Yarborough argues that they differed in their motivation and convictions. Yarborough claims his primary motivation stemmed from a genuine concern to create equal rights under the law for all people, and Johnson’s position on civil rights was simply a means to achieve his personal political aspirations. Like Yarborough, others also viewed Johnson as a man who could sense the political wind shifting and was capable of changing his direction before the wind did.²⁴ But Johnson’s speech at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania,
on May 30, 1963, offers no evidence of a radical shift from 1957:

Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skin, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact. To the extent we shall have fallen short of assuring freedom to the free.25

Johnson's address reflected the urgent concern for the social and political turmoil that the country was experiencing at the time. The Albany, Georgia, protest march, riots at the University of Mississippi as James Meredith attempted to enroll, George Wallace's affirmation of segregation, Bull Connors' ordering of police dogs and water horses on Birmingham protesters, and the arrest of Dr. King and other demonstrators characterize the unstable social climate of the early 1960s. Expectations of African Americans continued to rise and many of its leaders began to call for a more extensive civil rights bill than those of 1957 and 1960. Thus, in 1963, another civil rights bill designed to outlaw discrimination in all public accommodations and institutions was proposed.

On July 16, 1963, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman James O. Eastland of Mississippi opened committee hearings on the proposed legislation. To avoid any delay by Chairman Eastland or the committee, in February 1964 the full Senate placed the civil rights issue on the Senate Calendar, and on March 9, 1964, Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana motioned to begin Senate debate on the measure.* Civil rights leaders and activists intensified their involvement and pressured President John F. Kennedy to push harder for the new law. However, Kennedy, like many presidents, was reluctant to move swiftly on civil rights legislation. According to Yarborough, Kennedy would have pushed forcefully for the legislation had he lived for a second term:

I don't think it would have passed as soon as it did under Johnson because I don't think Kennedy would have pushed it before he got re-elected and I believe he was going to be re-elected because that man had charisma such as I have never seen in any other human being! He had appeal... That is the most brilliant man I've ever been acquainted with in my life...."7

Kennedy's commitment to civil rights is debatable since there is evidence that "civil rights was not a burning issue with Kennedy" and was not a part of his legislative history in Congress.28 As president, it was clear that he harbored serious concerns about his image with Southern senators:

If we drive Sparkman, Hill and other moderate Southerners to the wall with a lot of civil rights demands that can't pass anyway, then what happens to the Negro on minimum wages, housing, and the rest?29

An examination of Kennedy's political ability certainly leaves room for criticism since the civil rights movement and the new civil rights bill suffered numerous setbacks and could have "fared better" if Kennedy had made racial equality a part of his primary agenda rather than a secondary concern.
After all, blacks played a significant role in Kennedy’s presidential victory in 1960 and many felt they deserved more attention from the president.36

By the end of 1963, Kennedy was dead and the burden of moving civil rights legislation through Congress was in the hands of the new president, Lyndon Johnson. Kennedy’s death affected the entire country and threatened to stall the “humanitarian” progress of the country.37

By the beginning of the new year the country had resumed its usual course of political warfare. Civil rights legislation met stiff opposition from Southern policymakers because it sought to extend the legal protection of citizens to vote and to provide equal and unrestricted access to public accommodations, federal jobs, and public education. It also proposed to increase the power of the Civil Rights Commission and the attorney general. Additionally, it attempted to establish federally-funded programs, an equal employment commission, and a voting census.38

The most serious fighting was in the United States Senate. The Senate debated the new bill for an unprecedented eighty-three days. Maintaining consistency with Southern attitudes toward civil rights, Southern senators argued forcefully against the passage of the bill. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, reflecting the sentiment of most Southern policymakers, argued that the bill was “politically motivated.” To Russell, the late president had “succumbed to the tremendous pressure brought to bear by all the groups of the extreme left wing and minority groups and asked for the bill bearing the name of Civil Rights.”39

Although most Southern senators were anti-civil rights, it was difficult for them to dismiss the fact that the new president was a Southerner and a proponent of the measure. His influence was extremely significant and should not be underestimated. To Yarborough, however,

Lyndon Johnson had a vast ambition … he wanted to be known as the greatest president in U.S. History … so he picked up the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 and claimed credit for it. Johnson knew that there was a great dislike for him because he was taking Kennedy’s place … Johnson saw his opportunity to be a great president and he took leadership of everything Kennedy was planning … Johnson became the great claimer … he took credit for what someone else had started.40

The bad blood between the Johnson and Yarborough camps was intense. So unfriendly was the relationship between the two that any politician from the Yarborough camp was almost certainly labeled an “anti-Johnson-Democrat.” Johnson took the rivalry between them personally: “He’s not on my side … He’ll undercut me every time he gets a chance.”41 The animosity worsened, prompting the president on occasion to travel throughout Texas in search of a formidable opponent to run against Yarborough, only to discover that his strength was legitimate.42

Yarborough surely recognized the tension. In Yarborough’s view, Johnson constantly claimed too much credit for passing various legislation.
"He couldn't pass a ... thing," Yarborough charges. "Only Congress in cooperation with the president can pass laws." Yarborough claims the passage of various legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 should not be attributed solely to Johnson, since they "were laws that Congress and the Kennedys had been fighting for for years."^93

To accelerate the passage of the new bill, Johnson exercised his political power to secure as many votes in the Senate as he could. Unlike many senators, who openly voiced their position, Yarborough remained silent and non-committal. Concerned that Johnson might boast of having persuaded him, Yarborough refused to reveal his position. Since he had voted consistently for civil rights, Yarborough's actions did not leave much doubt in the minds of many policymakers in regard to how he would vote on the new measure:

Nobody knew how I was going to vote and I hadn't told anybody how I was going to vote ... Johnson constantly asked me how I was going to vote and I wouldn't tell him because he would claim he persuaded me to vote that way ... I wasn't about to let him take credit. ^39

By alienating himself from the president, Yarborough failed to take advantage of propitious opportunity to unite forces with Johnson and accelerate the passage of the civil rights bill. His oversight can be attributed to a large extent to his concern about Johnson's political strength and dominating personality:

Johnson had a vast political ability... A lot of politicians, if you oppose them like I had, would kick you in the teeth and see to it that you never got anything... Johnson wasn't that way; he carried constantly a bowl of sugar in one hand and a bottle of vinegar in the other... He would pour that vinegar on you and then hand out that bowl of sugar... He was trying to win you over constantly. He was the smartest politician I have ever known. ^40

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 garnered substantial support in the House of Representatives. The predominantly Democratic House passed the bill by the wide margin of 290 to 130. In contrast, passage in the senate faced tough opposition. ^41 The bill faced an array of political attacks. ^42 Most of the recalcitrance, as expected, was from Southern senators. Three groups under the leadership of Allen J. Ellender of Louisiana, John Stennis of Mississippi, and Lister Hill of Alabama sought to prolong the debate of the bill by attacking various sections of it. ^43

According to Yarborough, several Southern senators led the charge to either kill or dismantle the bill, but to him:

Dick Russell of Georgia was the main brain ... he was the best informed man in the Senate on the bill. He was a very brilliant leader and a brilliant intellectual strategist. ^44

Russell certainly exhausted every possible opportunity to voice the position of Southern senators toward the bill. Although he asserted his support for
equality. His objection to the new civil rights measure was that it compelled citizens to interact with one another.46 Other senators from the deep South followed Russell’s lead and for similar reasons, opposed the civil rights bill. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina also was a powerful voice of dissent. The interference of the federal government in “social relationships” was one of Thurmond’s greatest concerns:

Even many who favor integration indicate in correspondence to me that they oppose this legislation because it would give unprecedented power to Washington bureaucrats to try to force changes in human attitudes on the selection of associates, both in private as well as in public life.46

Despite the stiff opposition from his colleagues, Yarborough was convinced that the Senate would pass the bill. Addressing the Texas Council of Voters, a black political organization, in 1964, Yarborough asserted his confidence that the bill would pass:

I believe in performance. I believe we’re going to have a civil rights bill. I believe it’s going to pass somehow, sometime this year.47

Yarborough was correct in his prediction. In June 1964, the United States Senate passed the measure. Yarborough argues that the momentum of the civil rights movement, the death of President Kennedy, the ambition and political savvy of Lyndon Johnson, and the perseverance of liberal Senators, combined to move the bill through congress. As expected, most of the Senators from the Old Confederacy, voted against the bill:

Most people believed that because you’re from the South you had to vote against civil rights. I’m the grandson of two confederate soldiers and I didn’t have to vote against it... Times had changed... I wasn’t betraying the South... I was living my own life.48

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Reaction toward the new law varied. Many religious groups held prayer meetings near the Capitol and some African American leaders welcomed the long-awaited action. James Farmer, director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Roy Wilkins, executive Secretary of the NAACP, and Martin Luther King, Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership
Conference (SCLC), praised the bill. But black nationalist leader Malcolm X condemned it. Some policymakers argue that civil rights legislation harmed the country more than it helped; Yarborough, however, contends that the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was "beneficial for America":

I believe it was carrying out the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. I believe what it was doing was implementing the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights... It might not have been popular but I think it was beneficial as a whole.

Yarborough believes strongly that the problem with contemporary civil rights issues is not the legislation itself, but rather the implementation of it, particularly in the area of public education. He believes that forced integration "destroys families and weakens the public school system." He contends that "many parents intentionally place their children in private schools and withhold their money from the public school systems" by moving to the suburbs. The flight of whites away from the urban areas results in the exodus of tax dollars and the ultimate decline of public schools in the cities.

Notwithstanding the various analyses and interpretations of the civil rights era, it is clear that Senator Ralph Yarborough's stand on civil rights was a noticeable departure from traditional Southern politics. His unique stand on these issues and his account of the forces shaping the legislation is useful to students of history. Yarborough's assessment of the legislative history during these critical years, although it may be at variance with that of others, certainly provides historians with fruitful data that can assist in reconstructing the emergence and development of civil rights in the United States.

NOTES

2U.S. Congressional Record, March 12, 1956, pp. 4459-4460.
5Phillips, Yarborough.
6Phillips, Yarborough.
7Phillips, Yarborough.
8Phillips, Yarborough.
9Phillips, Yarborough.
12Texas Observer, January 22, 1957.
Yarborough Interview.


*Texas Observer*, February 19, 1960, p. 5.


Yarborough Interview.


