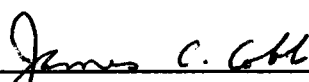


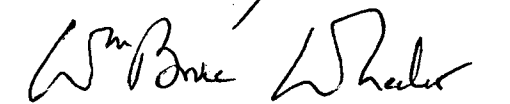
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Travis Dayhuff entitled "The 1938 'Purge' Campaign in South Carolina and Southern Political Culture in the New Deal Era." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.



Dr. James C. Cobb,
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

The 1938 "Purge" Campaign in South Carolina and
Southern Political Culture in the New Deal Era

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Travis Dayhuff

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a political analysis of Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1938 "Purge" campaign in South Carolina. This thesis examines the roles and reactions of South Carolina's Senators Ellison D. Smith and James F. Byrnes to Roosevelt's intervention in state politics. This thesis asks why Byrnes, a pro-New Deal Roosevelt confidant aided the old demagogue Smith and helped him win South Carolina's 1938 Democratic primary, and concludes that Byrnes had one foot in the modern, progressive, new South while one foot remained mired in the old South's political culture.

This thesis also scrutinizes southern political culture in the New Deal era. What do the reactions of Byrnes, Smith and other South Carolinians to the "Purge" effort tell us about southern political culture? This thesis examines Wilbur J. Cash's and J. Morgan Kousser's explanation of southern political culture, and concludes that South Carolina in 1938 manifests a synthesis of both models. The "Purge" campaign in South Carolina revealed a southern political culture that flowed out of the shared historical experiences of South Carolinians only to be reaffirmed by the state's restrictive political measures introduced at the end of the nineteenth century and still viable in 1938.

This thesis utilizes manuscript collections, newspapers, and various secondary sources.

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Chapter 1: South Carolina and Southern Political Culture in the New Deal Era

Many times during South Carolina's 1938 senatorial primary campaign Ellison D., "Cotton Ed," Smith, climbed atop the candidate's rostrum in small Carolina towns like Sumter, Lynchburg, or Pickens, and recited arguably his most infamous stump speech... His address began with a melodramatic account of the Magna Carta's signing on the plains of Runnymede. Next Smith proceeded gracefully through the glorious battles of the American Revolution, and finally arrived at The War Between the States where gallant, gray-clad men died defending the South. Then, rather suddenly, "Cotton Ed" paused and looked down at the front row of the crowd where his eyes affixed themselves upon an old farmer. This poor, overall-clad cracker looking something akin to an emaciated scare-crow, howled, "Aw, hell Ed tell us 'bout Philadelpy!"¹

¹Accounts of Smith's "Philadelphia" stump speech in: Allan A. Michie and Frank Ryhlick, Dixie Demagogues (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1939), 280-281; Daniel W. Hollis, "'Cotton Ed Smith' - Showman or Statesman?," The South Carolina Historical Magazine 71 (Oct. 1970): 250-251; Jack Irby Hayes, Jr., "South Carolina and the New Deal, 1932-1938" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina 1972), 512-513; Harry S. Ashmore, An Epitaph for Dixie (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1957), 100-103; The State (Columbia, SC), and The Greenville News, (Greenville SC), 14 June - 31 Aug. 1938.

This hardly subtle prompt allowed Ellison Durant Smith, a South Carolina senator from 1908 to 1944, to proceed with some of his worst race-baiting demagoguery. "Cotton Ed" treated the crowd to his version of the famous walk-out during the 1936 Democratic national convention in Philadelphia. Smith reminisced:

When I came out on the floor of that great hall, bless God, it looked like a checkerboard - a spot of white here, and a spot of black there, and when that negro, as black as any negro in Edgefield county, kinkey-headed, blue-gummed, slue-footed, prostituting the highest office under Jehovah for political purposes started praying by George I walked out.²

The starkly racist "Philadelphia story" excited 1938 campaign crowds to fever pitches, distracting them from the substantive economic issues brought up by Smith's rivals. In 1949 V.O. Key described South Carolina politics as an entity in which, "[t]he race problem in exaggerated form adds a weapon that can be used at times to destroy all semblance of a rational politics."³ When it came to using the race weapon in the 1938 senatorial campaign, Smith never hesitated. The crowd attentively listened for Smith's conclusion:

...he started praying and I started walking, and as I pushed through those great doors, and walked across that vast rotunda, it seemed to me that old John C. Calhoun

²The Greenville News, 27 July 1938.

³V.O. Key Jr., Southern Politics in State and Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 321.

leaned down from his mansion in the sky and whispered in my ear, 'You did right Ed.'⁴

Ellison D. Smith was a walking, breathing manifestation of the South's distinct political culture during the New Deal era. Irreparably influenced by his perception of the South's history, candidate Smith behaved in a peculiarly southern way - exercising certain time-honored southern political traditions and behavior. The relatively undemocratic political structure in South Carolina, with its suffrage restriction and one-party politics, contributed to and reinforced this southern political tradition and behavior.

James Francis Byrnes, the junior senator from South Carolina, abhorred Smith's brand of demagogic political exhibitionism. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, on May 2, 1879, Byrnes was neither a southern demagogue nor a Smith-type, New Deal obstructionist.⁵ On the contrary, Byrnes worked very closely with Roosevelt, shepherding New Deal legislation through the House and Senate. Byrnes joined the "Brain Trust" in 1932 and thereafter advised Roosevelt on presidential appointments and legislation, and served as his personal confidant on virtually all other political matters.

⁴Hollis, 251; Ashmore, 101.

⁵James F. Byrnes, All in One Lifetime (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 12; Winfred Bobo Moore, Jr., "New South Statesman: The Political Career of James Francis Byrnes, 1911-1941" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University 1976), x.

While Roosevelt kept Smith out of the loop on some important New Deal matters, the President looked forward to working on New Deal legislation with Byrnes in Washington.⁶ Roosevelt called Byrnes, "a man of excellent common sense - a liberal and not of a radical or conservative predilection."⁷

Two senators with very different personal and political philosophies, Smith and Byrnes joined in a temporary, fairly covert, political alliance during Franklin Roosevelt's infamous 1938 "Purge" campaign. This thesis analyzes the "Purge" campaign in South Carolina and examines the reactions of Byrnes and Smith to Roosevelt's intervention in state politics. Why did Byrnes, a pro-New Deal Roosevelt confidant, aid the old demagogue Smith and help him win South Carolina's 1938 Democratic primary?

This paper defines political culture as the arguably distinct political behavior, traditions, and practices exhibited by a people. What do the reactions of Byrnes, Smith, and other South Carolinians to the "Purge" tell us about southern political culture in the New Deal era? Does South Carolina's political culture derive from W.J. Cash's peculiar "mind of the South" or J. Morgan Kousser's

⁶Letter, Franklin D. Roosevelt, to James F. Byrnes, 21 November 1936, James F. Byrnes Collection, Special Collections at Clemson University, Box 13(1)-23 Folder 17(1).

⁷George B. Tindall. The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945 (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1967), 610.

explanation of a southern political system "shaped" or perverted by suffrage restriction?⁸

In 1941 Wilbur J. Cash's The Mind of the South described a distinct southern political "mind" or political culture that is continuous with the past. This political culture, formed during the plantation days of the old South, emerged from the Civil War and Reconstruction stronger and more fortified than ever, and remained "unreconstructable" in the New Deal era.⁹

Cash described a southern political culture based mainly on white supremacy, a tragic shared history, and what he termed the "hell of a fellow" complex. Divorced from work by the plantation system, the Cashian "hell of a fellow" desired contests to prove his honor, enjoyed hedonistic spectacles, and loved rousing political rhetoric. For the southern "hell of a fellow," politics simply existed as "an arena wherein one great champion confronted another or a dozen, and sought to outdo them in rhetoric and splendid gesturing."¹⁰ Cash described southern politics as bereft of real issues, substantive political discourse, and class antagonism. He wrote, politics:

⁸Wilbur J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941); J. Morgan Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One Party South, 1810-1910 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974)

⁹Cash, The Mind of the South.

¹⁰Ibid. 52, 53.

was the story of a continual progress in the personal and the extravagant - a continual contest on the part of every man to outdo all others...in whipping up the tastes and passions of the Demos with ever more personal and extravagant representations of the South in full gallop against the Yankee and, even more, the Negro.¹¹

Cash attributed much of this peculiar political "mind," this conspicuous political culture, to the distinct historical background held in common by white southerners. This tragic history shared by white southerners, certainly mythologized and embellished to some extent, differed radically from the history shared by the inhabitants of the northern United States.

Before the late twentieth century experiences of Vietnam, economic slow-down, and Watergate, northerners shared a history characterized by fairly constant success. As a region the North experienced almost continuous economic progress and expansion, and never suffered a serious or lasting martial defeat in its wars against Native Americans and various foreign powers.

Conversely, the South shared a common history comprised for the most part of poverty and defeat. During the Civil War invading Yankee armies crushed the fabled Old South with its large plantations, armies of slaves, and genteel aristocrats. When the Yankees freed the slaves, the South's formerly sound investment in labor evaporated. Emancipation cost southerners

¹¹Ibid. 247.

billions of dollars in hard-to-replace capital. And, of course, the war with the North took an unprecedented toll in casualties on the southern states. Cash wrote that the Civil War and Reconstruction created a new South "developed so much of fear, of rage, of indignation and resentment, of self-consciousness and patriotic passion."¹² Cash described a South with the defeat of the Civil War and the humiliation of Reconstruction seared vividly into its soul. This experience of defeat and humiliation fortified the South's distinct political culture.

Following the Civil War, the South experienced military occupation, domination by Yankees and Republicans, and widespread poverty. White southerners viewed the attempt, feeble as it was, to place black freedmen on equal footing, at least politically, with white southerners as the utmost in a series of outrages perpetrated upon the defenseless South. White southerners vehemently resented and violently resisted the notion that the former slaves, the "mudsills" of Old South society, would occupy a position of equality with the white man. Misplaced fears of widespread miscegenation seemed to undergird much of this white apprehension. Cash believed the North's attempt at Reconstruction strengthened the southern political "mind," "beyond reckoning, and ... made it one of

¹²Ibid. 106.

the most solidly established, one of the least reconstructible ever developed."¹³

Reconstruction also strengthened the South's fear and rejection of new ideas and concepts from the outside world. Southerners exhibited special hostility towards intellectual concepts coming from the "Yankee" North. The disagreeable northern doctrines of black emancipation and equality certainly fathered this hostility. Cash called this southern anti-intellectualism "the savage ideal." After Reconstruction the South attempted to seal itself off from threatening notions from the outside while clinging tenaciously to all things considered "traditionally" southern. Southerners developed a:

propensity to see in every notion coming out of the North a menace and an abomination; to view every idea originated by the Yankee or bearing the stamp of his acceptance as containing hidden within itself the old implacable will to coerce and destroy; to repudiate him intellectually as passionately as he was repudiated politically.¹⁴

For the most part white southern Democrats threw off the yoke of northern/Republican domination by 1876. The Democratic party then changed from "a party in the South and became the party of the South..."¹⁵ Soon after "Redemption" white southerners busily reversed the few political and social

¹³Ibid. 107.

¹⁴Ibid. 136.

¹⁵Ibid. 128.

gains made by blacks under the Reconstruction governments. Cash described the Civil War and Reconstruction as a metaphoric blast furnace forging southern political culture. The Civil War killed many southerners, destroyed the slave-based economy, and maybe most significantly impaired southern political culture. From this traumatic period white southerners retained a political culture that necessitated vehement hatred of Republicans, Yankees, and outside interference in state affairs by the national government. This historical/cultural hatred of outside interference in the affairs of "sovereign " southern states characterized the South's political culture well into the twentieth century.

In 1974 J. Morgan Kousser detailed a different explanation for southern political culture in his monograph, The Shaping of Southern Politics. Kousser offered a structural/systemic paradigm for the South's distinct political culture. He believed disfranchisement and suffrage restriction "shaped" southern political culture. Suffrage restrictions like the poll tax, the literacy test, the multiple ballot-box law, and the white primary perverted southern politics, turning it into a one-party, issue-less, demagogic mess. Kousser wrote "electoral laws and procedures did in themselves have very substantial impacts on both the

scope of political participation and the mode of political activity in the South."¹⁶

After the Civil War but before the enactment of disfranchisement, Kousser described a relatively healthy, fluid southern political system with two functioning, competing parties. After suffrage restrictions cut blacks and most poor whites out of politics, this healthy fluidity disappeared. By "lopping off the lower economic strata," Kousser wrote, "the poll tax preserved southern institutions by creating a fairly homogeneous polity - white, middle-class, and Democratic."¹⁷ This now voiceless bottom third of southern society consisting of the poorest whites and all blacks had no recourse in this new one-party political system dominated by conservative white Democrats.

These restrictions on suffrage gave the South its one-party system that in turn created the less than enlightened demagogic style and tone of southern politics. Often in southern states several candidates, espousing basically the same conservative Democratic beliefs ran against each other in the Democratic primaries. With all these conservative Democrats fighting for recognition within the same party, politics degenerated into a factional free-for-all. The conservative sameness of the candidates'

¹⁶Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics, 5.

¹⁷Ibid., 72.

platforms forced the competitors to differentiate themselves from their fellow Democratic brethren with loud, abrasive rhetoric. Kousser believed that the need to stand out in this one-party, conservative-dominated political system gave rise to issue-less primary campaigns filled with mudslinging, race-baiting, and other demagogic attention getting exhibitionism.

In sum, Kousser developed a structural/systemic explanation while Cash offered a historical/cultural explanation for the South's distinct political culture. This paper examines both models and shows that this distinct southern political culture played a determinant role in Roosevelt's 1938 "Purge" campaign in South Carolina.

Chapter 2: "Cotton Ed" Smith and "Jimmy" Byrnes: South Carolina's Democratic Senators

In 1936 Ellison D. Smith actually stormed out of Philadelphia's Democratic National Convention twice. Smith first left on June 24, when a black minister, Marshall Shepard of Philadelphia's Mount Olive Baptist Church, prepared to deliver the invocation starting the day's business. Smith returned the next day only to storm out again when Arthur W. Mitchell, a black congressman from Chicago, addressed the convention. After the second walk-out Smith declared, "I have had enough. This time I am leaving the convention to stay gone."¹⁸

True to his words, Smith did "stay gone." He packed-up and went back home to South Carolina. For Smith, allowing black participation at the convention equalled racial treachery. His Democratic party, the party he had been a part of all his life, and the party that upheld white supremacy in South Carolina since Wade Hampton's days, betrayed him. In the mid to late 1930s Smith and many other conservative southern Democrats became increasingly uncomfortable with Roosevelt's Democratic party. Smith felt uneasy within

¹⁸The New York Times, 26 June 1936.

Roosevelt's winning Democratic coalition of northern liberals, urban blacks, organized labor, and southern Democrats.

To say that Ellison D. Smith and other conservative southern Democrats did not ideologically cohere with the liberal New Deal Democrats on Capitol Hill might be a considerable understatement. Roosevelt and his liberal cohorts believed that the Great Depression necessitated a massive increase in the federal government's role in citizens' lives. Consequently, many of Roosevelt's New Deal programs designed to relieve the great suffering caused by the dire economic emergency also greatly expanded the power of the federal government. This new extension of Washington's power scared Senator Smith, a self-proclaimed "Jeffersonian." Smith perceived this new federal expansion as a zero-sum game in which the individual states lost power and influence to the federal government. Smith preached the doctrine of "state's rights" vehemently and frequently during his long political career. Providing no exception to this rule, Smith often declared the primacy of the "sovereign" state during his 1938 senatorial campaign. Smith's address before the annual reunion of Confederate Veterans of South Carolina in Columbia, South Carolina, on July 31, 1935, serves as a typical and instructive statement of his views on state's rights.

In this speech, Smith described his version of the objectives pursued by the Constitution's founding fathers.

When crafting the Constitution the founding fathers did not want to deprive the states of their sovereign rights; "they did not propose...to actually create a Frankstein, that might ultimately destroy, or nullify all those precious principles and privileges for which they had suffered and many had died."¹⁹ Smith described the Constitution's tenth amendment as the amendment that tells the federal government to "keep your hands off [the states] until you get our permission in the manner prescribed."²⁰

Smith callously dismissed the desperate economic situation that compelled many South Carolinians to seek help from the federal government. He declared:

I realize that when through some combination of circumstances a disastrous depression may bring poverty and distress to American citizens, they are likely to turn to any source which may promise relief from their immediate suffering, and endanger the precious principle of local self-government and individual rights. In other words they may be tempted to sell their birthright for a mess of potage, to sell for dollars and cents those principles that their forebears deemed more precious than life itself.²¹

It does not seem to be much of an exaggeration to conclude from the above statement that Smith wanted South Carolina's starving poor to reject federal relief in favor of drawing

¹⁹Speech, given by Smith before the annual reunion of the Confederate Veterans of S.C., 31 July 1935, Box 24-33, 33(1), James F. Byrnes Papers.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 5.

what comfort they could from the knowledge that the rights of their sovereign state remained inviolate.

And, of course, according to Smith the "real" cause of that epic struggle, the Civil War, was not slavery, but instead the fight for southern "state's rights." Smith often aroused old memories of federal occupation and domination during Reconstruction and attempted to shift those feelings of resentment towards this new twentieth century, Roosevelt-directed extension of federal power. In Smith's thinking the unchecked extension of federal power would eventually allow the federal government "to send troops to South Carolina at any time it sees fit to supervise, regulate and control the local concerns and affairs of South Carolina."²²

Hidden not far beneath the surface of Smith's crusade for state's rights lay the pervasive race issue. Along with many other conservative southern Democrats, Smith feared that any federal interference in southern state affairs could lead to a change in the racial status quo in their states. Indeed, at this time in the Senate, Smith fought against the proposed federal Wagner-Costigan Anti-Lynching Bill. This bill struck at the inequitable, repressive social system in the South. In Smith's view, this bill threatened the maintenance of economic, political, and social white supremacy. Smith

²²Ibid., 12.

defended his opposition to the anti-lynching bill on purely duplicitous constitutional grounds:

I am proud to say to you that I led the fight in the Senate to prevent that obnoxious and unconstitutional bill from being considered in the Senate, not because I, or any citizen of my state, condone or uphold mob rule or the unlawful violence of a mob, but I opposed that measure on the fundamental ground that it sought to invest the Federal Government with power to wrongfully invade the sovereign rights of the States in the administration of justice.²³

Roosevelt and the New Deal liberals certainly had ideological enemies in Smith and his conservative southern allies.

His antics at the Philadelphia convention, coupled with his reactionary, histrionic speeches in the U.S. Senate marked Smith as a southern demagogue of the worst kind. Smith further alienated himself from Roosevelt and the New Deal Democrats by increasingly playing the role of the hide-bound obstructionist in the Senate, blocking New Deal legislation and appointments. Smith opposed Roosevelt's nominations of Rexford G. Tugwell as undersecretary of agriculture and Hugo Black as Supreme Court Justice.²⁴ Indeed, Smith proudly proclaimed his support for the anti-New Deal congressional "conservative manifesto" in 1937.²⁵ Not many members of the Senate could equal Smith's unpopularity with adherents of the

²³Ibid.

²⁴Hollis, 249-250.

²⁵Tindall, 624-625.

New Deal or surpass his ability to obstruct progressive legislation.²⁶ When Smith walked out of the Philadelphia convention, he also symbolically walked out on Roosevelt and his New Deal. Smith earned himself a place on Roosevelt's 1938 "Purge" list.

V.O. Key correctly asserted, "South Carolina has had a succession of spectacular race orators who almost blanket out the achievements of its abler and more temperate leaders, such as James F. Byrnes."²⁷ Byrnes, who served in the Senate from 1931-1941, embodied a very important senatorial link between conservative southern Democrats and New Deal liberals. Byrnes had "a foot in each camp. He [was] liked and respected in each."²⁸ Byrnes authored, helped author, supported, or secured the passage of the following New Deal legislation: the Economy Bill '33, the Farm Credit Act '33, the Home Owners Loan Act '33, the Thomas Inflation Amendment to the AAA '33, the Independent Offices Appropriation Bill '34, the Securities Exchange Bill '34, the 4.8 billion-dollar Emergency Relief Bill '34, the Bonus Bill '36, the Court Packing scheme '37, the 3.7 billion-dollar Relief Bill '38, and the Government Reorganization Bill '38-'39.²⁹ The passage of Roosevelt's New

²⁶Hayes, 49, 149.

²⁷Key, 130.

²⁸The Christian Science Monitor, 11 May 1939, 21.

²⁹Hayes, 148., Moore, 128.

Deal depended heavily upon Byrnes's skillful use of congressional power and procedure.

Byrnes and Roosevelt did have their disagreements, especially during the Second New Deal. Byrnes did not believe in expanding relief benefits when he perceived that the national economic emergency had ended. Much to Roosevelt's chagrin, Byrnes and his senatorial allies cut relief funds in order to get some control over what they saw as reckless, run-away deficit spending. Disagreements aside, Roosevelt and Byrnes maintained a close, and for the most part mutually beneficial personal and political relationship heading into 1938.

Chapter 3: "Democracy" in South Carolina

In order to understand the dynamics of South Carolina's 1938 senatorial race, a brief description of South Carolina politics is necessary. The political playing field in the South Carolina of 1938 bore little resemblance to a truly democratic system. "Redeemers" such as Wade Hampton and post-Reconstruction politicians like Ben Tillman made sure that this metaphorical playing field tilted heavily and quite unabashedly in favor of the lily-white Democratic party. South Carolina, like the rest of the Deep South, operated a political system that mocked true democracy. At best South Carolina was a limited oligarchy in which only the white middle and upper classes maintained total political power and control over the state.

Whites deemed total control over politics a necessity in order to keep the state's blacks, who composed a majority of the population, in their inferior "places." Most whites simply feared black political power. White South Carolinians resented the political power blacks employed to better their condition during Reconstruction. Whites worried that enfranchised blacks might combine in a fusion arrangement with poor whites and take control of the state away from the upper

and middle class whites. This fear and loathing of black political power drove whites into implementing a very restrictive, undemocratic political system. J. Morgan Kousser asserted that southern whites operated a political system that fostered "[i]nequities, intolerance of dissent, racial discrimination and extremes of wealth and poverty [that] flourished as nowhere else in America."³⁰ This subversion of democracy began shortly after Reconstruction with the implementation of registration laws, the eight-box ballot system, poll taxes, literacy tests, the understanding clause, and the whites-only Democratic primary. When combined with violence and intimidation, never in short supply in late nineteenth century South Carolina, these laws removed blacks and many poor whites from the political process.

Kousser aptly referred to registration and eight-boxes laws as "quasi-literacy tests."³¹ These voting hurdles placed before South Carolina's blacks and poor whites indeed functioned as practical literacy tests. Many blacks and poor whites in the late nineteenth century could not read or write; therefore, when confronted with any kind of semi-complex registration procedure, they could not comply. South Carolina adopted the so called "eight-box" system in 1882.³² This

³⁰Kousser, xiii.

³¹Ibid., 50.

³²Ibid.

system provided a specifically labeled ballot box for each separate election: one box for the state senate election, one for the governor's election, one for local elections, one for judicial elections, one for the U.S. senatorial election, etc. The duplicitous white Democrats at the polling stations would not reveal to the illiterate black which box was for which election. The poll watchers would also periodically switch the positions of the ballot boxes throughout the day to further befuddle the illiterate black voter. And, of course, the vote counters discarded any ballots placed in the wrong boxes. This eight-box law drastically curtailed the numbers of blacks voting in elections and the numbers of votes received by Republican candidates. The eight box law cut the Republican vote by sixty-six percent and the Black vote by fifty percent.³³

The final nail in the coffin of South Carolina democracy came from "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, the fiery up-country farmer who came to power in South Carolina in the 1880s. Tillman usurped the governorship from Bourbon, low-country, planter control. While never a true liberal populist, Tillman did represent the up-country white yeoman against the haughty low-country planters and Charleston aristocrats. At heart Tillman remained a conservative while "his manner no doubt seemed radical and 'populistic' to cultivated businessmen in

³³Ibid., 91.

Charleston or New York, Tillman's actions were solidly in the mainstream of contemporary Southern Democrats."³⁴ Tillman feared that low-country Bourbons would use black support to throw him out of office in the next election. Therefore, Tillman called a constitutional convention and eliminated those few blacks and even some of the poor whites remaining in the electorate. The poll tax, literacy test, and understanding clause all passed during the 1895 constitutional convention.³⁵ Tillman effectively disfranchised blacks and many poor whites in South Carolina. In 1896 South Carolina began operation of a whites-only Democratic primary.³⁶

White Democrats in South Carolina quickly disfranchised, quickly restricted the suffrage, and, consequently, quickly made their state into something less than a democracy. Kousser wrote, "[t]he Palmetto State's polity was perhaps farther advanced in 1881 - more like the Southern political system of the first half of the twentieth century - than that of any other state."³⁷ Indeed, South Carolina's 1938 political playing field maintained this turn of the century, distinctly undemocratic flavor. In 1949, V.O. Key described South Carolina, much like the rest of the deep South, as a place

³⁴Ibid., 146.

³⁵Ibid., 239.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., 84.

where racism provided the impetus for the repressive, undemocratic nature of the political system. The counties with the highest rates of black population tended inevitably to be the places with the most repressive, undemocratic politics. The specter of race always seemed to stifle debate over economic issues in the state. Key wrote, "the politicians of South Carolina - and Mississippi - have put the white-supremacy case the most bitterly, most uncompromisingly, most vindictively."³⁸

South Carolina's politics had degenerated into what Key called "multi-factional localism." Nineteenth century disfranchisement destroyed the Republican party as a viable political option and thus ended real two-party competition in South Carolina. Without the helpful crystallizing effect on politics provided by of a strong two-party system, what remained was intra-Democratic party political competition based not on economic and social issues, but on personality and locality. South Carolinians tended to back "local political potentates" from their home towns or counties and then hope to build enough support state-wide to win the election.³⁹ Key did perceive a low-country, up-country

³⁸Key, 130.

³⁹Ibid., 134.

political split in South Carolina, but by the mid-twentieth century this split seemed less and less relevant.⁴⁰

This battle within the Democratic party also encouraged demagogic ranting and raving about blacks and about the personal lives of political opponents. This demagoguery was designed to differentiate the candidate from the crowd of other Democratic candidates espousing basically the same economic and political programs. Therefore, political debate lacked discussions of substantive economic issues and descended to a particularly low level in South Carolina. The following analysis of the 1938 senatorial election gives credence to the preceding proposition. Key concluded that the South Carolina electorate "...susceptible to manipulation by Negro-baiting, can be whipped into groupings quite contrary to what might be expected on the basis of rational political behavior."⁴¹

In South Carolina nomination by the state Democratic party equalled automatic election to office in November. The only real election in the state occurred within the lily-white Democratic primary. Usually more than two candidates ran in the Democratic primary necessitating a second run-off primary election. When South Carolina's Republican party ran opposition candidates, they suffered overwhelming defeat in

⁴⁰Ibid., 136.

⁴¹Ibid., 146.

November. In South Carolina the candidates in the Democratic senatorial primary campaigned together in all the state's counties. With its endless debate-like stump speeches this traveling road show began June 14 and ended August 31, 1938.⁴²

⁴²For a chapter-long description of the South Carolina political system see, V.O. Key, Jr., Southern Politics in State and Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950) and for details of the 1938 primary campaign see The Greenville News, The State, and The New York Times June-September 1938.

Chapter 4: "Sleepy Ed" and the "Coat-tail Swingers": The 1938 Senatorial Primary Campaign in South Carolina

By 1937 the Congress had split into conservative anti-New Deal and liberal pro-New Deal blocs.⁴³ As time passed, this split had progressively less to do with party labels. Democrats, like Ellison D. Smith, Millard Tydings, Guy Gillette, and others, became some of the staunchest foes of Roosevelt, while progressive Republicans like Robert LaFollette supported a more potent, more liberal New Deal. In order to secure the passage of more New Deal legislation and placate the liberal/progressive wing of the Democratic party, Roosevelt and his advisors decided to "purge" the Democratic party of its anti-New Deal conservatives. Indeed, Roosevelt believed he had an obligation to promote and protect the liberal Democratic party platform set forth at the 1936 convention. In a "Fireside Chat" in June 1938, Roosevelt declared:

⁴³William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940 (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 252-269.

As head of the Democratic Party...charged with the responsibility of the definitely liberal declaration of principles set forth in the 1936 Democratic platform, I feel that I have every right to speak in those few instances [state elections] where there may be a clear issue between candidates for a Democratic nomination...⁴⁴

Roosevelt campaigned actively on behalf of New Deal candidates in the West and attacked anti-New Deal, conservative Democratic candidates in the South. In the South, Roosevelt focused on ousting Walter F. George of Georgia, Ellison D. Smith of South Carolina, and Millard Tydings of Maryland.

The Democratic primary campaign in South Carolina featured three candidates: Ellison D. Smith, seeking his sixth Senate term; Edgar Brown, a powerful state legislator from Barnwell; and Olin Johnston, then South Carolina's governor from Spartanburg. Roosevelt's personal favorite Olin Johnston, announced his candidacy from the White House steps on May 16, 1938. After hearing the announcement Smith commented, "it is now quite obvious that one of the issues in the campaign will be interference from Washington in a local South Carolina primary."⁴⁵ Later that week, upon seeing Johnston eating in the Senate restaurant with Claude Pepper, Lister Hill, and other New Dealers, the irascible old Smith sauntered up to the table and said:

⁴⁴James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1956), 360.

⁴⁵The Greenville News, 17 May 1938.

Bless me. Governor Johnston in person! Howdy Olin, and I see you are running against me. Well, I just want to bid you welcome and say that I am going to beat hell out o' you in the South Carolina primary.⁴⁶

Before the start of South Carolina's Democratic primary campaign, rumors abounded about how and when Roosevelt would express his disdain for Ellison D. Smith. Behind the scenes at this time, Senator James F. Byrnes worked hard to prevent the "purge" of any state's conservative Congressmen. In his autobiography, Byrnes relates his discussion with Roosevelt in which he urged the President not to interfere with the elections of the legislative branch. Byrnes remembered:

I urged him not to try to control the legislative branch of the government, pointing out that Senators represented their states and not the President...the voters would resent interference by an outsider even though he was President.⁴⁷

Byrnes wanted especially to keep the "Purge" out of South Carolina. He counselled the President's advisors against making the major mistake of attempting to influence South Carolina's state politics. Byrnes forwarded a letter dated May 17, 1938, to the President's secretary, Marvin McIntyre, from a concerned South Carolinian urging against presidential interference on behalf of Governor Johnston. This letter, sent from Sumter, South Carolina, shortly after Johnston

⁴⁶Ibid. 20 May 1938.

⁴⁷Byrnes, All in One Lifetime, 101.

announced his candidacy from the White House, expressed the view that Edgar Brown, not Johnston, had the "confidence of the thinking people."⁴⁸

Along with the letter from Sumter, Byrnes added a cover note to McIntyre declaring, "I am not taking any part in the Senatorial race in South Carolina..."⁴⁹ In his autobiography, Byrnes claims he made it clear to Roosevelt that he would indeed help any of his Senate friends targeted by the "Purge" for elimination. This claim made by Byrnes in his autobiography that he openly defied Roosevelt leaving "...no doubt in his mind I would do everything in my power to help my friends who were marked to fall under the ax," must not have included Ellison D. Smith.⁵⁰ Byrnes's support for Smith remained covert. Though he could not convince Roosevelt to abandon the "Purge," Byrnes did get his friend Bernard Baruch to donate money to those senators attacked by Roosevelt.⁵¹

Again, shortly after Johnston's apparent anointment at the White House by Roosevelt, E. Roy Stone expressed concern over the President's support for Johnston. Stone asked

⁴⁸Letter, H.C. Haynsworth, to Byrnes, 17 May 1938, Official File Folder 300 South Carolina in F.D.R. Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, NY.

⁴⁹Cover Letter, Byrnes to McIntyre 19 May 1938, O.F. Folder 300 South Carolina, F.D.R. Papers.

⁵⁰Byrnes, All in One Lifetime, 101.

⁵¹Ibid.

Roosevelt whether he will throw all his support behind Johnston. Stone stated, "it is very necessary that we have this information before our Democratic convention meets tomorrow as the majority of the New Deal forces in this state seem to lean toward Col. Edgar A. Brown for the Senate."⁵² There is no evidence that Brown ever had stronger support as a New Deal candidate than Johnston. Brown never led Johnston in any of the published opinion polls. However, this correspondence is important because it shows the danger involved in backing Johnston. By supporting Johnston and ignoring Brown, Roosevelt could possibly alienate those who supported Brown in South Carolina. This alienation could then lead to Smith, the ardent anti-New Dealer, receiving the votes of the bitter and angry Brown supporters in the primary run-off election.

The President did have people in South Carolina encouraging him to make campaign stops in their state. The Textile Workers Organizing Committee of the C.I.O wrote asking the President if he would stop in Spartanburg and endorse Johnston for the Senate. Lucy Randolph Mason wrote concerning Johnston, "The campaign is very hot and many forces are

⁵²Telegram, E. Roy Stone to F.D.R., 17 May 1938, O.F. Folder 300 South Carolina in F.D.R. Papers.

aligned against him, while the textile workers and many of the more progressive people are for him."⁵³

Out on the campaign circuit, candidate Olin Johnston claimed one hundred percent adherence to the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt. He claimed South Carolina needed him working with his friend Roosevelt in order to improve the Palmetto State. He chided Smith for aggravating Roosevelt and for sleeping on the job. A Capitol Hill photographer caught the venerable Smith napping during a Senate debate. Johnston declared, "they won't take my picture in the senate asleep. I'm going to be an active senator."⁵⁴

Candidate Edgar Brown also claimed devotion to the New Deal and Roosevelt. Brown criticized Johnston for his handling of the state highway commission and claimed he would bring home more New Deal money and projects to the South Carolina than either Smith or Johnston. Brown and Johnston hammered away at incumbent Senator Smith, who they claimed through his obstruction of the New Deal and aggravation of the President denied South Carolina all the federal patronage it rightly deserved.

Both challengers attacked Smith for a statement he made during Senate debate. They accused Smith of saying and

⁵³Letter, Lucy R. Mason to McIntyre, 25 July 1938, Official File, Trips of the President 200-CCC South Carolina, Box 45, F.D.R. Papers.

⁵⁴The Greenville News. 19 June 1938.

believing that a worker in South Carolina could live on just fifty cents a day. Smith claimed he made the statement as part of a purely hypothetical discussion about lower southern costs of living and wage differentials between North and South. Smith even brought copies along of the Congressional Record to back up his assertion. Ignoring the record, Johnston and Brown harassed Smith about the statement throughout the entire campaign.⁵⁵

Ellison D. Smith claimed he supported Roosevelt and New Deal bills when they helped his state and opposed New Deal legislation when it did not. He described his two challengers as nothing more than Roosevelt "coat-tail swingers," who must "bend their knees to one man [F.D.R] to get the rights their state is entitled to."⁵⁶ Smith generally stuck to a demagogic, three-pronged campaign platform featuring state's rights, white supremacy, and a tariff for revenue only. The primary campaign proceeded along through the various county seats with the candidates offering basically the same criticisms of each other along the way. Smith offered his "Philadelphia" speech again and again. Brown and Johnston berated Smith for trying to ride to the Senate on the back of the poor Negro.⁵⁷

⁵⁵The daily articles on the primary campaign (June 14-August 31 1938) in The State and The Greenville News report the "fifty cents a day" campaign charge.

⁵⁶The Greenville News, 19 June 1938.

⁵⁷Ibid.

In the meantime, Roosevelt still seemed unsure about making a "Purge" stop-over in South Carolina in late July 1938. From his ship the President sent a telegram to Marvin McIntyre, asking him about the dates of South Carolina's first and second primary elections. Roosevelt also asked if McIntyre would send him the information he had on the probable outcome of the senatorial contest in that state.⁵⁸

McIntyre advised the President in a return telegram of July 30, 1938, that he considered intervention in South Carolina's senatorial contest imprudent. McIntyre said that by stopping in South Carolina Roosevelt would not do much good for Johnston in the first primary and could possibly hurt the New Deal candidate for governor Burnett Rhett Maybank. McIntyre even proposed delaying the "Purge" train's departure from Georgia or slowing down the train on the way to Greenville so that a very late arrival in South Carolina would preclude any presidential address. McIntyre suggested "a slow down run to reach Greenville after ten [would give] us an out."⁵⁹ Whether McIntyre followed the advice of Byrnes in making this recommendation or came to this conclusion himself is unknown. But it is clear that McIntyre most surely

⁵⁸Naval communique, F.D.R. to McIntyre, 30 July 1938, O.F. 300 South Carolina, F.D.R. Papers.

⁵⁹Telegram, McIntyre to F.D.R., 30 July 1938, O.F. 300 South Carolina, F.D.R. Papers.

counseled Roosevelt against trying the "Purge" in South Carolina.

Roosevelt made a tour by train through the mid-west and western United States supporting New Deal candidates Rubert J. Bulkley of Ohio, Kentucky's Alben Barkley, Arkansas's Hattie Carraway, Oklahoma's Elmer Thomas, and Texas's Lyndon B. Johnson.⁶⁰ After enjoying a fishing trip through the Panama Canal, Roosevelt landed in Florida to start the southern wing of his "Purge" campaign.

Byrnes tried yet again to dissuade the President before he boarded the "Purge" train headed for Georgia and South Carolina. In response to worried telephone calls from Hopkins and McIntyre, Byrnes sent a letter telling why he was against the proposed "Purge" to Pensacola, Florida, where Roosevelt would soon land. In the letter Byrnes claimed that friends of Roosevelt and the New Deal supported both Brown and Johnston. Byrnes wrote that strong Roosevelt interference on behalf of Johnston could possibly help him win the first primary by taking votes away from Smith and from Brown. Byrnes continued saying that if Johnston won the first primary without intervention Brown's supporters would vote for Johnston over Smith in the second primary; however, if Brown's supporters "feel they have been treated unfairly by Johnston getting the

⁶⁰Burns, 361-362.

President to interfere and they vote for Smith, it will elect Smith."⁶¹

Byrnes also cautioned Hopkins that Roosevelt's interference in South Carolina could have adverse effects on New Dealer Burnett Rhett Maybank's chances of winning the governor's race against the race-baiting, reactionary Cole Blease. At the end of this recommendation, Byrnes again asserted that he "will not actively support any one of them [Smith, Johnston, or Brown], and I have no request or recommendation to make."⁶²

With Roosevelt on board, the "Purge" train rolled into Barnesville, Georgia on August 11, 1938. Here, at the first stop of his southern "Purge" campaign, Roosevelt strongly endorsed North Georgia's District Attorney Lawrence Camp for the Senate and attacked incumbent Walter F. George and candidate Eugene Talmadge in front of 25,000 Georgians. Roosevelt began his speech with a rather muted discussion of rural electrification. Following the facile pleasantries, Roosevelt launched into a speech on Georgia politics.

Roosevelt criticized "two types" of leaders that he believed harmed the American people's "economic and social

⁶¹Letter, Byrnes to Hopkins, 9 August 1938, 1938 Miscellaneous File A-O, James F. Byrnes Papers at Clemson University; Byrnes, All in One Lifetime, 102.

⁶²Ibid.

progress."⁶³ In an all-too-thinly veiled reference to ex-Governor Talmadge, Roosevelt described him as a man "who harps on one or two remedies or proposals and claims that these one or two remedies will cure all our ills." Next Roosevelt implicitly attacked George as a leader who "says that he is in favor of progress, but whose record shows that he hinders or hampers new measures." Roosevelt further declared that he needed representatives from Georgia who would help him pass the New Deal through Congress. He wanted Georgia to send him:

senators and congressmen who are willing to stand up and fight - fight night and day for federal statutes drawn to meet actual needs - not something that serves merely to gloss over the evils for the time being, but laws with teeth in them which go to the root of the problems.⁶⁴

As he continued, tensions rose on the speaker's platform where Roosevelt stood in uncomfortable proximity to George, Talmadge, and Camp. Roosevelt said that he had the right to give his opinion on the Senate race because Georgia considered him an "adopted son". Then came the direct attack on the incumbent Senator George: "the senior senator from this state cannot possibly in my judgement [sic] be classified as belonging to the liberal school of thought." Trying in vain to soften the political blow, Roosevelt announced that even though he opposed George, he still considered him "a personal

⁶³The Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938.

⁶⁴Ibid.

friend," a "gentleman," and a "scholar." Restating his opposition to George, Roosevelt declared, "on most public questions he and I do not speak the same language."⁶⁵

Roosevelt made it clear that the respect he held for gentleman George did not extend to Eugene Talmadge. Roosevelt dismissed Talmadge's candidacy briefly and condescendingly. Roosevelt said, "I read so many of his proposals, so many of his promises, so many of his panaceas that I am very certain in my own mind that his election would contribute little to practical government."⁶⁶

Finally, Roosevelt plainly stated his support for Lawrence Camp. He said, "if I were able to vote in the September primaries in this state I most assuredly would cast my vote for Lawrence Camp." After Roosevelt concluded his remarks Senator George, who the Atlanta Constitution described as "impassive" during the speech, jumped-up and shook Roosevelt's hand. George reportedly told the President, "I regret that you have taken this occasion to question my democracy and to attack my public record. I want you to know that I accept the challenge." Roosevelt responded to the senator with a hasty, "God bless you Walter, let's always be friends," as he made his way down from the podium.⁶⁷

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

Senator George quickly responded to Roosevelt's "Purge" attempt in Atlanta by calling on his fellow Georgians to reject this blatant federal interference in Georgia's affairs. George declared, "the Georgia people are ready to fight this thing through to a finish and prove that we in Georgia are capable and determined to run our own affairs."⁶⁸ A Gallup poll published on August 17, showed that a cross-section of Georgia voters overwhelmingly disapproved of the "Purge" attempt. Seventy-five percent of the respondents disapproved of Roosevelt's interference in Georgia's senate race.⁶⁹

Historian James C. Cobb credited Roosevelt's Barnesville attack as the crucial factor that led to George's victory in September. The "Purge" attempt invigorated Senator George's formerly uninspired campaign and handed him the emotion-charged, winning issue of outside interference in Georgia state affairs. While George benefitted from the public attention generated by Roosevelt's "Purge", the third candidate Eugene Talmadge was forgotten. Talmadge fell from public view during the heated debate over Roosevelt's interference indeed "[a]fter Barnesville Talmadge could not get back into the spotlight..."⁷⁰

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid., 17 August 1938

⁷⁰For a description of the Georgia "Purge" see James C. Cobb, "Not Gone, But Forgotten: Eugene Talmadge and the 1938 Purge Campaign," The Georgia Historical Quarterly 59 (Summer

The President pulled no political punches in his Georgia "Purge." Roosevelt openly criticized the candidates he viewed as illiberal and anti-New Deal. Roosevelt's unprecedented attack on members of his own party shocked many. Now with some idea of what to expect from Roosevelt, South Carolina's politicians anxiously awaited the arrival of the "Purge" train as it made its journey from metropolitan Atlanta to the South Carolina piedmont.

Chapter 5: The "Purge" Comes to South Carolina

Roosevelt's "Purge" campaign finally reached South Carolina when the President's train pulled into Greenville on August 11, at 10:40 pm. After Roosevelt's sharp attack on conservative Senator George, many expected a vehement Roosevelt attack on Smith. In Greenville a crowd of approximately 15,000 people gathered to hear the President's short address from the rear of the train. Governor Johnston politically preempted the other candidates by boarding the "Purge" train in Gainsville, Georgia. Johnston hoped to occupy a prime political position beside Roosevelt when he spoke in Greenville. When the train pulled into the station Ellison D. Smith, Edgar Brown, James Byrnes, and a few other politicians scrambled aboard and joined Johnston in welcoming President Roosevelt to South Carolina.⁷¹

After the President exchanged pleasantries with the South Carolina politicians, Johnston introduced Roosevelt and the President gave a short address. First Roosevelt gave some details about his long trip from the West coast through the Panama Canal, then by train up through Florida and Georgia,

⁷¹The New York Times, 12 August 1938; The Greenville News, 12 August 1938.

and finally to South Carolina. He briefly mentioned his speech given in Georgia earlier that day. Then Roosevelt asked the crowd for the election of representatives that would work:

to help this country not only get on its feet again but work for the wider distribution of natural wealth and better conservation of our natural resources and the establishment of a definite floor under wages and an increased buying power for the farmers of the nation...⁷²

Roosevelt mentioned the South Carolina senatorial campaign at the last possible moment. As the train pulled away from the station Roosevelt yelled:

I want to suggest two things to you. The first is that a long time ago I promised to Governor Johnston I would come down some time this year to visit the capital of the state of South Carolina: I have never been there. The other thing is I don't believe any family or any man in South Carolina can live on fifty cents a day.⁷³

Roosevelt obviously intended this mention of a future visit to Johnston as a subtle personal endorsement of Johnston for the Senate. Roosevelt's mention of the "fifty cents a day" issue clearly signaled an attack on Senator Smith. Both Johnston and Brown had been bludgeoning the incumbent senator with the dubious "fifty cents a day" charge throughout the stump campaign. Roosevelt attacked Smith less vehemently than he attacked George, but nonetheless he did express his

⁷²The Greenville News, 12 August 1938.

⁷³Ibid.

displeasure with Smith. Possibly Byrnes's advice, the suggestion that Roosevelt not interfere, prompted Roosevelt's less-than-hardy rebuke of Smith. Roosevelt did not make an outright endorsement of Johnston over Brown either. Byrnes believed this was due to his earlier advice. "I am satisfied he refrained from urging the election of Johnston in South Carolina solely because of the fear it would antagonize Brown and hurt Johnston in the second race."⁷⁴

Byrnes believed the "fifty cents a day" shot was unfair to Smith. Byrnes wrote, "Smith stated 'If by way of illustration, a man could live on fifty cents a day in South Carolina and a dollar and a half in New England' we should not seek by law to change climatic conditions and other factors affecting the cost of living."⁷⁵ Byrnes did worry that this issue, now buttressed with presidential clout, would cost Smith many votes in the state.⁷⁶

By disregarding most of Byrnes's advice in Greenville, Roosevelt pushed Byrnes securely into Smith's camp. After Roosevelt's address, Byrnes decided he would covertly aid Smith's campaign. Byrnes paid to have pro-Smith campaign material sent to all the veterans and postal employees in

⁷⁴Letter, Byrnes to Bernard Baruch, 16 August 1938, 1938 Miscellaneous, File A-O, James F. Byrnes Papers.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

South Carolina. Byrnes also bankrolled poll watchers for Smith. In a letter written to Bernard Baruch's secretary, Byrnes displayed some fear that Roosevelt would follow through with his promise at Greenville to come back to South Carolina and aid Johnston later in the year during the second primary. Byrnes wrote, "I know there will most likely be a second primary and Smith will need more help in the Second Primary [sic] than he does now. This will be particularly true if the President comes out directly against him as had been intimated."⁷⁷ This letter also reveals the covert nature of Byrnes's aid to Smith. He asked Ms. Boyle to "[p]lease destroy this letter."⁷⁸

With Roosevelt out of Greenville and safely up the train tracks, the campaign proceeded in South Carolina. The majority of editorial opinion in newspapers in and out of South Carolina attacked Roosevelt and his "Purge" campaign. Clearly, Roosevelt had angered many editors by trying to dictate which candidates got elected in the targeted states. Many categorized the "Purge" as a gross abuse of the executive branch's power. An editorial in the Charlotte Observer echoed many others criticizing the President for attacking

⁷⁷Letter, Byrnes to M.A. Boyle, 17 August 1938, 1938 Misc. File A-O. James F. Byrnes Papers.

⁷⁸Ibid.

experienced senators and attempting to replace them with mere Roosevelt "yes-men," or "rubber-stamps."⁷⁹

Back out on the stump circuit in South Carolina, the campaign remained much the same as before Roosevelt's address in Greenville. Smith did not vehemently attack Roosevelt for the "fifty cents a day" remark. Rather, he claimed that his opponents for the Senate had misled the President about Smith's record. Smith reiterated the fact that he supported Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936, and that he supported the majority of New Deal, especially the agricultural legislation. Brown and Johnston continued to go after Smith for obstructing the New Deal, sleeping on the job, and wasting the people's time with his incessant race-baiting. Smith, Johnston, and Brown made their last campaign stop August 26, in Columbia, the state capital.⁸⁰

Here the three candidates spoke for the last time from the same podium. Among other things, Edgar Brown condemned Smith for his 1936 walk-out on the black minister in Philadelphia and for Smith's foul-mouthed campaign speeches. Brown said, "As much profanity and vulgarity as I have heard from one candidate in this race warrants prayer [for] him

⁷⁹The Charlotte Observer 14 August 1938, Clipping in O.F. 300 S.C., F.D.R. Papers.

⁸⁰The Greenville News, 27 August 1938.

either by negro or Chinaman."⁸¹ Brown also claimed it was unfair to call him [Brown] a "coat-tail swinger" because "he had been for the principles of the New Deal long before President Roosevelt came into office."⁸² Brown cited a tax on power companies he pushed through the state legislature as proof of his long-standing New Deal principles.⁸³

Olin Johnston, the next speaker, quickly dismissed Brown as a "dead bird" in the senate contest, no doubt because of Brown's last place position in the polls. Johnston again criticized Smith for the "fifty cents a day" remark and ended with a review of his life in which he detailed how he raised himself up from humble beginnings as a poor cotton mill boy to become the governor of the glorious state of South Carolina.⁸⁴

The incumbent Smith thanked his supporters for keeping him in the United States Senate longer than either Calhoun or Hayne. Then Smith listed and rebutted the "lies" told about him by his competitors: the "fifty cents a day" charge, alleged non-support of Roosevelt, alleged obstruction of the New Deal, alleged Republican contributions to his campaign, etc. Finally Smith characteristically defended his use of race in the campaign. He declared, "My opponents said the

⁸¹The Greenville News, 27 August 1938.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., 27 August 1938.

negro question was settled in 1876, but what about the negro applying for entrance to the University of South Carolina?"⁸⁵ Smith knew that this rather strange rationalization for his race-baiting would ring true to his racist constituency in South Carolina. The very fact that a black man stepped out of "his place" and applied to one of the state's universities in 1938 justified Smith's behavior. Thus ended the less-than-enlightened political discourse offered the public during the 1938 South Carolina Democratic senatorial primary campaign.⁸⁶

The day after the formal conclusion of the stump campaign in Columbia, a shock wave rumbled through South Carolina politics when Edgar Brown threw in the towel and conceded defeat in the Democratic primary. Brown pulled out of the race on August 27, just days before the primary election. With Brown out of the race, the threat of a run-off election disappeared. With Brown out of the race, Smith or Johnston would garner the simple majority of the votes needed to win in the first primary election.

Brown's late withdrawal created two critical problems for Olin Johnston. Johnston had hoped that Roosevelt might, as the President mentioned in Greenville, come back down to South Carolina and strongly endorse him over Smith. The President counted on a second run-off election occurring in South

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

Carolina between Smith and Johnston after the first primary eliminated Brown. Now with the election two days away, Roosevelt did not have enough time to travel down to South Carolina and campaign for Johnston. Roosevelt had time only to issue statements of support for Johnston from Hyde Park. The President declared, "One of these candidates thinks in terms of the past and governs accordingly. The other thinks in terms of 1938, and 1948 and 1958 as well."⁸⁷

Johnston's second problem involved quickly convincing Brown and his supporters to vote for him rather than Smith, but Johnston destroyed his chances of alliance with Brown in this politically suicidal telegram sent to Brown:

In view of the President's statement in the morning papers, it is evident if you want to help him carry forward his policies you will vote for me for the United States Senate. On the other hand, if you have been only a stalking horse in this campaign for the Liberty Leaguers, Republicans, and Roosevelt-haters, you will vote for Smith. Under which flag do you fight?⁸⁸

Suffice it to say, this belligerent statement did not win over Brown. Already angered by what he saw as unfair presidential interference in favor of Johnston in Greenville, Brown's reception of Johnston's telegram gave him the perfect excuse to vent some of his pent-up anger. He replied:

I have been a New Dealer for twenty years and when you were fighting the resolution endorsing Roosevelt in the 1932 state Democratic convention I was for Roosevelt.

⁸⁷The New York Times, 29 August 1938.

⁸⁸Ibid.

When you brought Huey Long to South Carolina to vilify and abuse the Administration I was for Roosevelt...When you were lying in the political bed and were a disciple of Talmadge of Georgia, the bitterest enemy that Roosevelt has in the South, I was then for Roosevelt. The fact that you, after observing Roosevelt's personal popularity, swung on to the Administration and now want to be the torch of Roosevelt in South Carolina does not change your true character. The choice now is strictly a matter for the people of South Carolina. I would not presume to dictate to them...⁸⁹

This telegram, hardly a ringing endorsement of Johnston, severely impeded Johnston's efforts at getting the majority of Brown's former supporters into his camp.

In response to Roosevelt's message of support for Johnston from Hyde Park, Smith again claimed that he supported most of the New Deal, especially when it helped his state. Smith regretted "...that President Roosevelt has seen fit to inject himself into the South Carolina senatorial campaign in an eleventh hour attempt to influence the voters of this state."⁹⁰ Commenting on Roosevelt's description of him as a man who "thought in terms of the past," Smith retorted, "I do think in 'terms of the past', because I cannot forget when Federal powers extended into South Carolina and all but destroyed our Commonwealth."⁹¹ Deftly alluding to Reconstruction, Smith in effect asked South Carolinians to reject Roosevelt's interference in state politics with the

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰The Greenville News, 29 August 1938.

⁹¹The New York Times, 29 August 1938.

same vehemence they exhibited against Yankee interference in their state after the Civil War.

White South Carolinians went to the polls on August 30, 1938, and cast their ballots in the state Democratic primary. With most of the precincts reporting, Smith declared victory that evening with a substantial lead over Johnston. Smith claimed his win was "a victory for true democracy."⁹² The voters in South Carolina gave Smith a very substantial victory margin. He garnered 178,777 votes to Johnston's 145,038 with 1464 precincts out of 1507 reporting.⁹³ Even with the President against him, "Cotton Ed" won back his seat for a sixth term. Earlier, during the campaign, Smith's supporters had ceremonially revived Wade Hampton's "Red Shirts." Smith along with his red-shirted followers marched down to Hampton's statue in Columbia for a victory party after the election. When asked why revive the Reconstruction era organization, a leader said simply because of "outside interference in South Carolina's affairs."⁹⁴ Smith's victory over Johnston presaged the complete defeat of Roosevelt's southern "Purge" campaign.

Editorial opinion in South Carolina generally hailed Smith's win and assailed Roosevelt's interference. The Greenville News described the election as a vote of confidence

⁹²The Greenville News, 30 August 1938.

⁹³Ibid., 1 September 1938.

⁹⁴The New York Times, 30 August 1938.

for Senator Ellison D. Smith. The editor believed this election embodied a "decisive rebuke" of presidential interference in state politics. This was a clear case of the executive branch abusing its power and prestige.⁹⁵ Finally, the editor described the election as a double victory, one victory for the people of South Carolina who know best who should represent them, and a second victory for general democracy, in that government by "yes-men" suffered ignominious defeat.⁹⁶

Columbia, South Carolina's newspaper, The State, linked Johnston's defeat to "South Carolina's political traditions," the historical traditions that have prompted South Carolina's rejection of outside interference in local affairs for generations.⁹⁷ The State believed that Roosevelt's interference harmed Johnston by "stimulat[ing] the Smith men and the anti-purgers".⁹⁸ Governor Johnston should have run on his own record rather than "coat-tailing" on the New Deal, said The State.⁹⁹ Other editorials from the Spartanburg Herald and The Columbia Record cited Johnston's acerbic, pre-primary

⁹⁵The Greenville News, 30 August 1938.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷The State, 1 September 1938.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

telegram to Brown as the obvious blunder that cost him the election.¹⁰⁰

The defeat of the "Purge" in South Carolina pleased both Smith and Byrnes. Later in his autobiography, Byrnes wrote a purely altruistic, Constitutional explanation of why he opposed the "Purge":

If...a President can defeat senators of his own party who disagree with him and secure the election of others who do agree with him, he will completely control the Congress and that division of powers that the framers of the Constitution intended to insure freedom from a dictatorship will disappear.¹⁰¹

Some question whether Byrnes had ulterior, Machiavellian motives for opposing Johnston. Byrnes stood to benefit little if another New Dealer like Johnston became a South Carolina senator. As it stood then, Byrnes controlled all the New Deal patronage in South Carolina. If Johnston appeared in the Senate, Byrnes might have to compete with him for Roosevelt's attention and New Deal patronage. Also, some have speculated that Byrnes hoped to keep Smith around for one more term so that Maybank, who just won the governor's race, could take over the old man's senate seat in 1944. If Johnston won in 1938, Maybank, a rising political star in South Carolina,

¹⁰⁰The Greenville News, 2 September 1938.

¹⁰¹Byrnes, 104.

might choose to run against Byrnes in 1942 rather than against the younger Johnston.¹⁰²

Regardless of his motives, Byrnes's behind-the-scenes influence peddling and financial aid for Smith certainly helped Smith defeat Johnston. Byrnes also revelled in the defeat of Roosevelt's "Purge" elsewhere in the South. Byrnes wrote a letter to Georgia's Walter George congratulating him on his victory over Camp and Roosevelt. Byrnes wrote, "You deserved to win. I hope that South Carolina's election on August 30, was of some help to you."¹⁰³ Byrnes realized that the election of Smith in South Carolina broke the back of the "Purge" campaign in the rest of the South.

The peculiar ineptness exhibited by Johnston in handling Brown's withdrawal certainly played a major role in the election. A warm, necessarily sycophantic, personal invitation sent to Brown asking him to join Johnston's New Deal campaign against the forces of conservative reaction certainly was in order, though perhaps by that time Brown had become so angered by Roosevelt's interference on behalf of Johnston that no telegram of any kind could have assuaged Brown and convinced him to throw his support to Johnston. A

¹⁰²For discussion of conspiracy theories see either Hayes, "S.C. and the New Deal," 551. or Moore, "New South Statesman," 278-279.

¹⁰³Letter, Byrnes to George, 16 September 1938, Misc. File 1938, James F. Byrnes Papers.

Gallup poll taken before Brown's withdrawal showed Smith with fifty-one percent of the vote, Johnston with thirty six percent, and Brown with thirteen percent.¹⁰⁴ If this data is accurate, Johnston certainly needed all of Brown's support for a victory over Smith.

Political scientist James MacGregor Burns believed Roosevelt's mismanagement of the Democratic Party partially caused the failure of the "Purge" effort. The "Purge" effort failed because Roosevelt, the "party chief", never built a solid grass-roots base of party support for the "extended" New Deal. Burns believed that Roosevelt should have challenged the anti-New Deal conservatives in Congress with strong coercive use of the Democratic National Party and New Deal patronage. Burns saw the "Purge" as a sign of "the bankruptcy of his [Roosevelt's] party leadership."¹⁰⁵

The degree of assistance Roosevelt gave Johnston deserves mention as a significant factor in the election. Roosevelt never gave Johnston much more than implied, subtle support. Roosevelt did not ask South Carolinians to vote for Johnston by name. Instead, Roosevelt placed Johnston beside him in all the right political places, the best examples being Johnston announcing his primary candidacy at the White House and riding on the "Purge" train with Roosevelt to Greenville. This

¹⁰⁴The New York Times, 30 August 1938.

¹⁰⁵Burns, 375-377.

implied support surely angered Brown, who also considered himself deserving of Roosevelt's support. Byrnes's non-interference advice on this matter certainly influenced Roosevelt's decision to keep the support for Johnston at a very low level. Roosevelt worried first about alienating Brown, and second about a general southern backlash against his interference.

Roosevelt would have had more success by either committing himself fully, vocally, and energetically to Johnston's candidacy or leaving the situation entirely untouched. If he took the complete hands-off approach, Brown might have stayed in the race, thus forcing a run-off election between Smith and Johnston. Then Johnston could have, without the interference-induced bad feelings, co-opted Brown's support in the run-off primary. However, the Johnston-Brown telegram discussed earlier puts Johnston's ability at co-opting support from anybody in serious doubt.

It is unlikely that even a strong, specific Roosevelt effort against Smith and in favor of Johnston before the first primary would have succeeded. In that case, Brown most certainly would have gravitated into Smith's camp. However, if Roosevelt could have waited to take strong action until after the first primary eliminated Brown, the results might have been different. A vociferous Roosevelt appeal for Johnston carried out after Johnston made peace with the Brown

faction might have succeeded in ousting Smith. This Johnston victory scenario rests on the not too sound assumption that a strong concerted Roosevelt effort could have overwhelmed the strong southern cultural resentment of federal interference. It is possible that with every increase in the level of presidential interference, a corresponding increase in the level of resentment would have manifested itself.

Dr. L.A. Crowell from North Carolina personified determined southern resentment toward federal interference. Crowell wrote to Roosevelt shortly after Smith's victory describing the "profound thrill" he felt when he heard about South Carolina's election returns that showed Ellison Smith's victory. He wrote:

I have been joyful mainly because this election indicates to me that the BLIGHT (sic) of your influence in this country seems at last, at long last, to be lifting. There is a God in this nation, for he has answered my prayers for your political undoing...

Crowell concluded by praising all those who stood-up against the "Purge"; "Thank God for the Baileys, the Georges, the Smiths, the Tydings, and all the other brave souls who saved this country in its darkest hour."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶Letter, L.A. Crowell, Jr. to F.D.R., 31 August 1938, O.F. Folder 300 South Carolina in F.D.R. Papers.

Chapter 6: Southern Political Culture: The Cash-Kousser Synthesis in South Carolina

The reaction of South Carolina and her leaders to Roosevelt's "Purge" attempt reveals the character of South Carolina's political culture and by extension the political culture of the Deep South during the New Deal era. In the South Carolina of 1938, both historical/cultural and structural/systemic factors played a crucial role in the outcome of the 1938 Democratic primary. The southern reaction to the "Purge" campaign manifests elements from both Cash's and Kousser's explanations of southern political culture.

Cash would likely agree that much of what passed for political discourse during South Carolina's 1938 senatorial stump-campaign qualified as nothing more than exhibitionist entertainment. "Cotton Ed" Smith embodied the perfect prototype of the Cashian "hell of a fellow" politician. Whenever possible, Smith avoided substantive economic and political issues, sticking instead to his tripartite recipe for success: race-baiting (ie. his Philadelphia speech), pushing state's rights, and cursing the evil tariff. Smith excited and entertained the crowds of farmers and mill-workers

with funny stories and low-brow attacks on his opponents and blacks.

In 1941 Cash described why southern candidates refrained from offering progressive political programs that promoted reform or assisted the lower classes. Progressive programs bred class conflict, fragmenting the unity of the Democratic party, creating the possibility that blacks might get back into politics, which in turn threatened white supremacy.¹⁰⁷ In 1938, white South Carolinians had a frantic concern with upholding white supremacy.

The peculiar history shared by white southerners binds the Cashian model of southern political culture together. As stated earlier, white southerners shared a tragic, defeat-filled history, unlike the rest of the United States. Southerners suffered bitter defeat in the Civil War, then emancipation brought the destruction of the southern economy, and finally, southerners perceived a Reconstruction in which Yankees, scalawags, and carpetbaggers ruled their region and even tried to enforce a semblance of racial equality on the beleaguered South. During the New Deal era, proud white southerners received another blow to their prestige when Roosevelt labeled the South the "nation's number one economic problem."¹⁰⁸ This common history filled with defeat, poverty,

¹⁰⁷Cash, 245.

¹⁰⁸Tindall, 599.

and the desire to maintain white supremacy bound the people of the white South together. This shared history made white southerners and white South Carolinians in particular very wary of any kind of outside interference by the North or the federal government that might upset the racial and social status quo. During the "Purge" campaign South Carolinians manifested their age-old hatred of outside intervention by rejecting Johnston. By declaring his intentions to influence southern senate elections, Roosevelt tripped a wire activating the South's historically backed hatred of intervention. Roosevelt probably did not realize that white southerners perceived the "Purge" effort as a dangerous threat to white supremacy in the South.

The vehemence with which people rejected interference in South Carolina manifested itself clearly when Roosevelt, who had the strong support of the overwhelming majority of South Carolinians, failed in his attempt at influencing the state's political situation. This historical/cultural aversion to interference affected even James F. Byrnes, a friend and valuable Senate ally of Roosevelt's. Byrnes had one foot in the modern, progressive, new South while one foot remained mired in the old South's political culture. Byrnes could not stomach the idea of the federal government interfering in South Carolina's politics. After the Greenville address,

Byrnes asked Vice President Garner, "[w]here were you when little Sherman started marching through the South?"¹⁰⁹

Smith skillfully played-upon the hatred South Carolinians had for "federal interference" in his re-election campaign by evoking shibboleths about federal interference and drawing parallels back to Reconstruction days. During his long career, Smith presented his tragic, and certainly melodramatic version of Reconstruction when attacking federal interference in all forms. Smith used this tactic against the federal anti-lynching legislation as well as against the 1938 "Purge."

Some description of Smith's version of Reconstruction, "that tragic era, that darkest page of American history" is required to better understand this southern cultural call to arms.¹¹⁰ While exciting and at times rustically eloquent, Smith's version of Reconstruction bore only slight resemblance to reality. Smith elaborated:

Supported by Federal bayonets, every department of the organized life of South Carolina was jeopardized. Our courts were filled with the venal and corrupt. Under the direction of this Federal power, our legislature was filled with ignorance, lust and corruption. ... Every element of society was threatened with debasement and extinction. The scalawags and carpetbaggers, supported and upheld by Federal bayonets, threatened the very extinction of all that was decent. The citizens of the state were subjected to the insolence and insults of ignorant villains under the rule and direction of usurped

¹⁰⁹Moore, 277.

¹¹⁰Speech, given by Smith before the annual reunion of the Confederate Veterans of S.C., 31 July 1935, Box 24-33, 33(1), James F. Byrnes Papers.

power. Every constitutional right of the State, all of its reserve powers and rights were disregarded and force took the place of law...¹¹¹

The heroes in Smith's epic drama were the white "Reedemers" led by Wade Hampton who liberated South Carolina from the evil clutches of Reconstruction. "They donned the red shirts, and under that matchless warrior and patriot, Wade Hampton, they drove from our midst, that unspeakable orgy of lawlessness, corruption and vice."¹¹² This widely believed, mythic version of history bound white southerners together in their hatred of federal interference in South Carolina. As mentioned earlier, South Carolina even saw the ceremonial revival of the ancient "Red Shirts" in 1938.

J. Morgan Kousser's structural/systemic model for southern political culture played an important role in South Carolina. The structure of South Carolina's political system certainly affected the out-come and influenced the tone of the 1938 election. In South Carolina only candidates within the Democratic party competed with any hope of securing the Senate seat in 1938. South Carolina's one-party system destroyed the usual political left and right, and instead substituted a multi-factional system within the Democratic party. This

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

multi-factional system fostered a politics of personality rather than of substantive issues.¹¹³

While Roosevelt's intervention in state politics provided Smith with an arguably solid political issue, and Smith's rivals tried to make support of the New Deal a significant issue, Smith still managed to base his campaign almost completely on personality and demagoguery. This politics of personality engendered all the demagogic mud-slinging and race-baiting out on the stump.

The structure of South Carolina's political system hurt Roosevelt's "Purge" effort because he could not simply support a candidate from one established party over a candidate from another established party. Roosevelt found it difficult to exert pressure upon one faction out of the three within the Democratic party without irreparably damaging the faction he sought to help. For Roosevelt's influence to have worked the political delineation between the candidates had to be much clearer.

Alone, neither Cash nor Kousser sufficiently explain the distinct political culture found in South Carolina. This thesis suggests that the southern political culture manifested in South Carolina of 1938 represents a synthesis of the Cash and Kousser models. "Cotton Ed" Smith certainly played the role of the Cashian "hell of a fellow" demagogue during the

¹¹³Kousser, 232.

primary campaign. Recalling their shared, distinctly southern history, Byrnes, Smith, and many other South Carolinians clearly feared and rejected federal interference in their state affairs. Alan Brinkley wrote in his article on southern politics during the New Deal:

Lurking not far beneath the surface, of course, was a much greater fear, shared by liberals and conservatives alike that outside intervention in southern politics in whatever form, would inevitably lead to an assault on the region's racial institutions.¹¹⁴

Kousser's model of a southern political culture perverted by the structure of the political system also applies to 1938 South Carolina. The one-party, multi-factional structure of South Carolina politics with the only real election occurring in an all-white primary dictated the demagogic tone of the campaign as well as hindered Roosevelt's intervention. In sum, the "Purge" campaign in South Carolina revealed a southern political culture that flowed out of the shared historical experiences of South Carolinians only to be reaffirmed by the state's restrictive political measures introduced at the end of the nineteenth century and still viable in 1938.

Along with elucidating southern political culture, the reaction to the "Purge" campaign in South Carolina showed the

¹¹⁴Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and Southern Politics," in The New Deal and the South, eds. James C. Cobb and Michael Namorato (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 109.

ambivalence conservative southern Democrats held for Roosevelt's new Democratic party and his New Deal. The Democratic party attained the Presidency by building the New Deal political coalition in which organized labor, northern liberals, urban blacks, and southern Democrats all contributed to Roosevelt's electoral success. Southerners like James F. Byrnes appreciated Roosevelt leading the resurgence of the national Democratic party, and he certainly wanted federal New Deal relief and developmental aid for his state. However, these Democratic southerners wanted this aid for their states without any accompanying social or political changes.

Many conservative southern Democrats opposed the expansion of the federal government into their state's affairs. The 1938 "Purge" campaign and its reaction offered one of the first signs that southern Democrats were becoming increasingly uncomfortable within Roosevelt's New Deal Democratic coalition. The anger southern Democrats felt over the repeal of the two-thirds rule at the 1936 Democratic National Convention, the growing northern Democratic agitation and support for a federal anti-lynching bill, and Roosevelt's failed "court-packing" plan further fueled the growing discord within Roosevelt's New Deal coalition. High-lighted by the "Purge" campaign this increasing strain within the Democratic coalition eventually manifested itself in the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948, the South's support of Barry Goldwater in 1964, and

the virtually solid Republican South we see in Presidential politics today.

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