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JAMES F. BYRNES: THE ROAD TO POLITICS, 1882-1910

WINFRED B. MOORE, JR.*

James F. Byrnes of South Carolina held major political office during the "Progressive Era," the New Deal, World War II, the beginning of the Cold War, and the first stages of the "Second Reconstruction." In the process, he exerted more influence than most politicians on America and the south during the first half of the twentieth century. Despite that fact, scholars have not yet given proportionate attention to his life and career. It is the purpose of this essay to redress some of that inattention by examining the major events of Byrnes's early life that led him to a career in national politics by 1910. Hopefully, this examination will provide a case study in the making of a twentieth century Southern politician, identify some of the formative experiences that shaped his later conduct, and, thereby, help to promote a better understanding of James F. Byrnes.¹

According to an old maxim, a man was judged in Boston by asking "What does he know?," in New York, "How much is he worth?," and in Charleston, "Who was his grandfather?" By that criterion, James F. Byrnes was born at a disadvantage. His grandfathers, Michael Byrnes and Francis McSweeney, were both Irish-Catholic immigrants who came to South Carolina around 1850. A farmer-overseer near Walterboro and a manual laborer in Charleston respectively, they lived, reared families, and died without leaving much recorded information about themselves beyond the names of their children.²

In the mid-1870s, one of Michael Byrnes's children, James, came from Walterboro to Charleston where he took construction jobs, worked as a clerk in the Police Department, and met Francis McSweeney's daughter, Elizabeth, whom he eventually married in 1878. After their marriage, the young couple rented a house in a blue-collar neighborhood

* Associate Professor, Department of History at The Citadel. The author wishes to thank The Citadel Development Foundation and the Charleston Scientific and Cultural Education Fund for grants which funded part of the research for this article.

¹ Among the offices Byrnes held were those of U. S. Congressman (1911-25), Senator (1931-41), Supreme Court Justice (1941-42), Director of Economic Stabilization, War Mobilization and Reconversion (1942-45), Secretary of State (1945-47), and Governor of South Carolina (1951-55).

² E. Merton Coulter, *George Walton Williams: The Life of a Southern Merchant and Banker* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976) p. 30; James F. Byrnes to Francis W. Miner, April 15, 1961, Folder 1500 (6), Byrnes Manuscripts, Clemson University; *The Eighth Census of the U. S., 1860*, Colleton County, S. C.; *The Eleventh Census of the U. S., 1900*, Charleston, S. C.

Huguenots who sought a place to settle in North America, a place which would offer excellent chances for economic development as well as challenge Spanish claims to exclusive dominion under the Papal Donation. Except for the great bay of Port Royal Sound, which had not figured in the Chicora Legend, the reality of Santa Elena proved far from the golden dreams of *Licenciado* Lucas Vazquez de Ayllon. Nor would the real site of Chicora — the Santee River — have proven much better.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, therefore, twenty-one years after the founding of the Spanish colony it was withdrawn because of military considerations which suggested the consolidation of the garrison with that at St. Augustine.⁴⁵ Santa Elena became once again a place claimed by Spain but not occupied. Mentioned in diplomatic discussions in the 1660s, 1740s, and 1770s, by the twentieth century the Spanish settlement on what was by then known as Parris Island had been forgotten. Knowledge of it was revived among specialists and a limited public in South Carolina by a controversy in the 1920s over the placing of a monument to Jean Ribault on Parris Island but general public awareness did not come until the publicity attendant on the beginning of excavations in 1979.⁴⁶ This paper is, then, one historian's effort to suggest part of the history of the Point of Santa Elena and the Spanish settlement there, to the end that its importance for American history might not remain unknown.

The author would like to thank the Council on Research of Louisiana State University and the *National Geographic Magazine* for their support of his research on this topic.

⁴⁴ This location for the Jordan is based on Chaves' statement that it was at 33½° N and 4 leagues (12.80 nautical miles) west of a cape (called Cape San Roman). The Santee-North Island combination of latitude and geography is the only one answering this description and fitting with the rest of the data he presents on distances between geographic features on the coast. *Alonso de Chaves*, 124. Other scholars, who did not use Chaves, argue for the Winyah Bay or the Cape Fear River as the Jordan.

⁴⁵ Vincente Gonzalez to ?, n.p., n.d. Madrid, 158?, AGI, Mexico 1841. Autos, Santa Elena, August 16-17, 1587, AGI, Santo Domingo 231, No. 64, fols. 24-29vto. The irony of this decision seems to have been lost on historians who have uncritically accepted the military justification as the reason for the Spanish colonies in Florida.

⁴⁶ Manifesto de Juan Joseph Eligio de la Puente, Havana, May 4, 1778, AGI, Santo Domingo 1598A. For the 1920s controversy see Alexander S. Salley, Jr., "The Spanish Settlement at Port Royal, 1565-1586," *this Magazine* 26 (1925): 31-40, and George H. Osterhout, "The Site of the French and Spanish Forts in Port Royal Sound," Huguenot Society of South Carolina, *Transactions*, No. 41 (1936): 22-36.

on King Street, gave birth to a daughter named Leonore in 1879, and were expecting a second child in the spring of 1882. Before spring arrived, however, James died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-six. Shortly after his death, his wife vacated her rented house and moved into her widowed mother's home across the street. There, on May 2, 1882, she gave birth to a son whom she named James Francis Byrnes in memory of her late husband.³

The death of James Byrnes, Sr., created major economic problems for the family. As the new head of a household consisting of her two small children and an aging mother, Elizabeth Byrnes had neither a job, adequate savings, nor adult male relatives to rely upon for help. The only immediate source of income was from the small fruit stand which her mother, Honora, operated in a front room of her house. Given these circumstances, many journalists later described the family as living in an underprivileged status on "the wrong side of the tracks" from which "Jimmy" Byrnes's rise to prominence was portrayed as a classic Horatio Alger story.⁴

Although there was more than an element of truth in these accounts, these journalists often overstated the degree of the Byrnes family's hardships. Elizabeth Byrnes's talent and determination soon did much to overcome the family's initial difficulties. As a high school graduate who had been taught dressmaking, Elizabeth Byrnes opened a dressmaking shop in her mother's home in the summer of 1882. Through yearly visits of studying in New York City's fashion district, she developed the ability to produce near perfect copies of the latest designs only weeks after they had first appeared. This ability quickly made her dresses much in demand among the women of Charleston. Eventually, Elizabeth Byrnes's growing business enabled her to rear two children well, buy two houses in Charleston, and be financially independent by the time she retired in 1900.⁵

³ J. F. Byrnes to M. A. McGarey, May 15, 1961, James F. Byrnes Manuscripts; *Charleston City Directory*, 1878-1883; "Marriage License of James Byrnes and Elizabeth McSweeney," Charleston County Probate Court; *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 17, 1943. The *Charlotte Observer* article is an interview with James F. Byrnes's sister, Leonore. Although relatively brief, it is the best single primary source on the history of the Byrnes family in Charleston. On the Byrnes children's birthdays see County birth records in the Charleston County Library and the "Baptism Registorum" in Charleston's St. Patrick's Catholic Church. James Byrnes's death is recorded in death records at the Charleston County Library and in the *Charleston News and Courier*, March 19, 1882.

⁴ *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 17, 1943; *Charleston City Directory*, 1881, 1882; The most popular of these articles was Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner, "Sly and Able," *Saturday Evening Post* 214 (July 20, 1940) pp. 18-19 ff.

⁵ *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 17, 1943.

Given his mother's accomplishments, Jimmy Byrnes's childhood was neither as austere nor his rise to prominence as "miraculous" as some journalists later suggested. Leonore Byrnes noted that her mother's accomplishments enabled the children to have ample time for baseball, bicycle riding, piano playing, school, and other normal activities. She concluded that "It doesn't seem to me that I missed very many things other children had." Commenting on Jimmy's rise to success, she added, "a flower blooming on an ash heap may be beautiful and inspiring . . . still my brother is not a geranium that bloomed in the cinders left by passing trains." Leonore's assessment seems to be correct. Within the admittedly depressed Southern context, the Byrnes family's economic status was probably about average if not upwardly mobile in the Charleston of the 1890s.⁶

However, if Jimmy Byrnes's childhood was not deprived neither was it indolent. That fact was due largely to his deeply religious, strong-willed mother who reared her children with affection but also with an "inflexible discipline" which emphasized thrift, hard work, and achievement. Among her often repeated homilies were "eat it up, make it do, wear it out," "nothing achieved without effort," and "strive for as near perfection as possible."⁷

This frugal, work-ethic philosophy played a dominant role in Jimmy Byrnes's development. Each Sunday, Byrnes accompanied his mother to St. Patrick's Catholic Church where he became an acolyte and sang in the choir. Under his mother's prodding, Byrnes was always at the top of his class through six years at St. Patrick's Parochial School and one year at Bennett Public School. Supplementing this formal education with vocational training, Elizabeth Byrnes paid for her son to take shorthand lessons which he practiced at night with dictation given by his mother. Throughout, Jimmy took several odd jobs to earn spending money and relieve some of his mother's financial worries.⁸

This growing desire to help his mother financially was a major reason for Byrnes's decision to quit school and take a permanent job in the summer of 1895. At the time, a secondary education was beyond the economic grasp of most people in South Carolina and hence Byrnes's

⁶ *Ibid*; James F. Byrnes was also uncomfortable with the sentimentality of some of these articles. See Byrnes to Charles Stanley, July 1940, Byrnes MSS.

⁷ *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 17, 1943; Alsop and Kintner, "Sly and Able," p. 19; Byrnes to Mary Fuller, Oct. 4, 1965, "Speech of C. C. Wyche," March 20, 1947, Byrnes MSS.

⁸ *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 17, 1943; Leonore Byrnes to Walter Brown, April 10, 1940, Cassie Connor to Frances Burns, March 26, 1947, Byrnes MSS; *Charleston News and Courier*, June 28, 1893, June 30, 1894, June 29, 1895; *Charleston Evening Post*, April 10, 1972; James F. Byrnes, *All in One Lifetime* (New York, 1958) p. 14; Alsop and Kintner, "Sly and Able," p. 19.

decision was not an unusual one. Although his mother was paying Leonore's way through high school and probably could have done the same for Jimmy, he did not want to put her through that strain. Accordingly, with his mother's consent, Byrnes took a job as secretary-stenographer with the Charleston law firm of Mordecai, Gadsden, Rutledge, and Hagood.⁹

Probably contributing to Byrnes's decision to quit school was his knowledge that employment at Mordecai and Gadsden would offer possibilities for advancement through exposure to some of the most prominent men in the city. Located on historic Broad Street, symbolic headquarters of the Charleston "elite," the firm was one of the most prestigious in the city. All of its partners were powerful members of the community but easily the most distinguished of the prominent group was Colonel Benjamin H. Rutledge. By birth the descendant of a prominent family and by marriage the relative of a famous colonial rice planter, Rutledge had graduated from Yale, served as a colonel in Wade Hampton's Confederate cavalry, participated in the "Redemption" campaign of 1876, and been elected to several terms in the state legislature before returning to full-time law practice in the 1890s. Complete with frock coat, string tie, and muttonchop sideburns, Rutledge was an almost perfect symbol of South Carolina's "Bourbon" elite.¹⁰

Attracted by the young secretary's efficiency, wit, and intelligence, Rutledge's son Benjamin, a junior partner in the firm, quickly assumed a major role in Byrnes's development. By taking Byrnes with him to private business meetings, Rutledge exposed his secretary to fascinating discussions of law and politics with the city's leaders. When Byrnes expressed an interest in studying these subjects further, Rutledge guided him through extensive reading and writing exercises dealing with books on politics, economics, history, and classical literature. Collectively, these exercises kindled Byrnes's interest in law and politics and did much to compensate for the high school education he had abandoned. "To Mr. Rutledge's studiousness and love of books," Byrnes acknowledged fondly, "I . . . owe much of any familiarity I have developed with the written and spoken word."¹¹

⁹ Byrnes, *All in One Lifetime*, p. 14; *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 17, 1943; Leonore Byrnes to Walter Brown, April 10, 1940, Byrnes MSS. For the sad state of public education in S. C. at the time, see, Ernest M. Lander, Jr., *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960* 2nd ed. (Columbia, 1970) pp. 122-155.

¹⁰ *Cyclopedia of Eminent and Representative Men of the Carolinas of the Nineteenth Century*, (Madison, 1892) I., pp. 148-50. On Rutledge's partners, see John C. Hemphill, *Men of Mark in South Carolina* (Washington, 1892) pp. 160-161, 284-85.

¹¹ Alsop and Kintner, "Sly and Able," p. 19; Byrnes, "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS; "Biographical Sketch," U. S. C. Archives.

Probably of equal importance to Byrnes was the male affection and guidance that Rutledge gave him. Byrnes later recalled that, as a fatherless child, he "appreciated the slightest attention paid me by some man I respected and admired. I never forgot it." Respected and admired by Byrnes, Rutledge paid him more attention than any other man and he never forgot it. Moreover, being of less than average size (5'7", 135 lbs), the son of a demanding mother, and the child of an ethnic family in a class conscious city, Byrnes probably had his share of insecurities and felt a need to earn acceptance through achievement. If Byrnes was looking for a model for such male achievement, he found it easily in Rutledge's example of the charming, well-mannered, lawyer-politician. Without delving too deeply into amateur psychology, it may be that Byrnes's personality and social outlook were shaped in part by the tension between the "common" world of his mother on the one hand and the "aristocratic" world of Rutledge on the other. Byrnes was attracted to both worlds, and the evidence suggests that for the rest of his life he often tried to compromise their differences and bring them more into harmony with one another so that he could be better accepted by each of them.¹²

Whatever the case, one certain by-product of Byrnes's childhood years was the development of a driving ambition. This ambition was demonstrated in May 1900 when he traveled to Spartanburg to compete for a vacant stenographer's job with the state's second circuit court headquartered in Aiken. Whether or not there was an age requirement for this job, the legal voting age in the state was twenty-one and Byrnes appears to have been concerned that his youth might have caused him difficulties in obtaining it. How Byrnes approached this matter in Spartanburg is not clear. It is certain, however, that he was born on May 2, 1882, that his age was recorded as twenty-one by two newspapers in May 1900, and that for the rest of his life his birthday was officially listed as May 2, 1879. The most plausible explanation for this turn of events seems to be that Byrnes misrepresented his age to decrease any problems that his youth might have caused him in acquiring the stenographer's job. If so, his indiscretion was relatively harmless. Nonetheless, when combined with the fact that he refused a substantial bribe from one of the other applicants not to finish the examination, it underscored Byrnes's determination to succeed. When all the exams were corrected, Byrnes had won the job.¹³

¹² Byrnes to W. D. Chitty, June 7, 1949, Byrnes, "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS.

¹³ Byrnes to Chitty, June 7, 1949, Leonore Byrnes to J. F. Byrnes, Nov. 4, 1913, Byrnes MSS.

Moving to Aiken and recording testimony in the dusty courtrooms of the seven county district that extended from Aiken along the Savannah River to the coast at Beaufort furthered Byrnes's development by providing him with an education in the life and politics of rural South Carolina. Thomas Wolfe could easily have been reflecting what Byrnes experienced in those courtrooms when he wrote:

The courthouse was the center of the community . . . for the country people . . . Here were their trials, suits, and punishments . . . their drawling talk of rape and lust and murder — the whole shape and pattern of their life . . . Outside of a battlefield a courtroom could be the most exciting place on earth, because it provided the greatest opportunity there was for observing life and character.

Absorbing much from these courtroom experiences and from the late afternoon "bull-bat" sessions with local leaders that often followed, Byrnes's "life was in the atmosphere of politics," the art of which he concluded "is more readily learned by personal contact than by private study." He never forgot this lesson in intimate, personal politics of which he eventually became a master.¹⁴

The most immediate result of his courtroom experiences, however, was to solidify Byrnes's interest in law. After studying in the Aiken law firm of Judge James A. Aldrich, Byrnes passed the state bar examination in 1903. Because he "did very little law business," however, Byrnes kept his stenographer's job and even began to look for a third means of employment to boost his income.¹⁵

Byrnes found such employment in 1904 when he and his friend Alva K. Lorenz, a journalism graduate of the University of South Carolina, borrowed money to purchase the local newspaper, the *Aiken Journal and Review*. As business manager, Byrnes expanded advertisements, purchased the first linotype machine in the area, and used his courtroom contacts to recruit additional correspondents. Combined with Lorenz's journalistic expertise, these actions modernized, expanded, and trans-

¹⁴ "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS; *Barnwell People*, March 12, May 14, 1903; *Beaufort Gazette*, Sept. 10, 1903; Thomas Wolfe, *The Hills Beyond* (New York, 1941) pp. 253-55, 257; Byrnes to Susan Binnicker, May 5, 1948, Byrnes to Leonard Williamson, June 7, 1965, Byrnes MSS. The seven counties included in the district were Aiken, Bamberg, Barnwell, Beaufort, Edgefield, Hampton, and Saluda.

¹⁵ Byrnes to Richard Elliott, Nov. 15, 1955, to Leonard Williamson, June 7, 1965, Byrnes MSS; *Barnwell People*, May 14, 1903. On Aldrich, see Hemphill, *Men of Mark*, V. I, pp. 14-17; "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS.

formed the bi-weekly newspaper into one of the best in the district.¹⁶

This concern for modernization as well as his maturing interest in politics was also reflected in Byrnes's editorials on the public issues of the day. One of the most controversial of those issues was the South Carolina "Dispensary," a state operated liquor store monopoly designed to eliminate saloons while maintaining state tax revenue from the sale of whiskey. Despite good intentions, Byrnes reminded readers that this law had been flagrantly disobeyed, especially in the lowcountry, through the proliferation of illegal saloons known as "blind tigers." The result was widespread political bickering, graft, corruption, loss of tax revenue, and disrespect for legal authority. Accordingly, Byrnes advocated that the Dispensary be replaced with local option legislation to give the counties control of liquor policy and thus restore political order in Columbia so that the state government could focus on more important issues. If not original, Byrnes's proposal nonetheless marked an early tendency to seek compromise and remove roadblocks to constructive political action.¹⁷

Perhaps the most persistent of those roadblocks was the troubling issue of race relations. Byrnes believed in disfranchisement, segregation, and keeping blacks in a subordinate role. In later years, he vigorously defended these practices from outside attacks. But if he did not support racial equality neither did he support paranoid white supremacists who disrupted southern society. Assuming that stance, one of Byrnes's editorials objected to the unequal courtroom justice frequently rendered to blacks as both unnecessary to preserving white supremacy and damaging to the whole legal process. Similarly, another editorial denounced the white-instigated Atlanta race riot of 1906 as "wrong and criminal" and "no matter how great our resentment [of alleged rape] may be, we must admit it." He concluded that speedier trials and swifter punishment of the accused, not lynching, was the best way to remedy the problem.¹⁸

While hoping that "likker" and "nigger" could be removed as impediments to progress, Byrnes also championed reforms designed to improve the political apparatus in South Carolina. One of these was the formation of the Aiken County Law and Order League to help investigate

¹⁶ "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes to Annie King, April 17, 1967, Byrnes MSS; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Sept. 30, 1904, 1904-05 *passim*; *Beaufort Gazette* Oct. 6, 20, 1904.

¹⁷ Francis B. Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge, 1944) pp. 234-61; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Jan. 16, July 3, 1906.

¹⁸ *Aiken Journal and Review*, Oct. 28, 1904, July 20, Sept. 25, 1906; *Beaufort Gazette*, Oct. 20, 1904. For a lengthier discussion of Byrnes's racial ideas, see W. B. Moore, Jr., "Soul of the South': James F. Byrnes and the Racial Issue in American Politics, 1911-1941," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, 1978 pp. 42-53.

political corruption and police the frequently dishonest elections of the second district. Another was the advocated repeal of "stump speaking" requirements in the Democratic primary. In Byrnes's opinion such requirements had too often spawned demagogues adept only at inciting voters while discouraging the emergence of less theatrical but more thoughtful and creative candidates. Only when new men with "new ideas of citizenship and responsibility" entered politics, Byrnes reasoned, could the state expect significant social improvement. Before long, Byrnes decided that he was such a man.¹⁹

Indeed, Byrnes's editorials had already begun to outline some of the changes which he envisioned as part of that social improvement. One of Byrnes's proposed changes was the expanded use of state funds and the acquisition of federal funds to construct large numbers of paved roads. In a poor state which then had only 400 miles of paved roads, Byrnes argued that dramatic expansion of highways was imperative to foster greatly needed economic growth. To accelerate that growth further, Byrnes proposed a state-funded advertising campaign to solicit northern industry and tourism. Along similar lines, he advocated strongly the creation of a statewide system of free public high schools complemented by a compulsory attendance law. Through these and other editorial statements, the young editor began to formulate a public philosophy concerned with bringing order to the state's politics, developing its economic potential, improving the welfare of its citizens, and bringing it closer to the mainstream of twentieth century American life.²⁰

While this philosophy was emerging, Byrnes had developed an engaging personality that helped him in his achievements. As early as 1902, the *Barnwell People* had noticed this charm, writing that Byrnes "is eminently persona grata" and his friends include "everybody of sound mind and good taste." Describing one reason why that was so, one of Byrnes's later political adversaries, cheerfully admitted:

He's a 'broth of a boy' . . . a very gay and amusing man . . . I don't know of any human creature I'd rather go out to a dinner party with than Byrnes . . . he was such fun, and he had such funny stories to tell and such funny songs to sing . . . he was a very charming, delightful person.

¹⁹ *Beaufort Gazette*, Oct. 20, 1904; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Nov. 4, 1904, June 29, 1906.

²⁰ Lander, *A History of South Carolina*, pp. 102-03; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Nov. 19, 1904, Oct. 23, 1906, Oct. 8, 1907.

The concensus view, expressed by one newspaperman, was that, "It is hard to dislike Jimmie."²¹

This charm extended to women, causing one Barnwell maiden to write in the local newspaper: "Four long sad months 'ere he returns/The dark eyed, sweet-tongued, lawyer Byrnes." Despite her infatuation, by 1902 the young lawyer's romantic attention was focused on Maude Busch, a graduate of Converse College and the daughter of Henry Busch, a wealthy and socially prominent Aiken businessman. Through their four years of courtship, Maude's father, a devout Episcopalian, expressed reservations about an early marriage as did at least one clergyman who warned Byrnes that marriages between Protestants and Catholics could be social dynamite in South Carolina. Despite such warnings, Maude and Jimmy fell in love and were married on May 2, 1906. After the wedding, Byrnes abandoned Catholicism and became a member of the Protestant Episcopal Church.²²

In explaining this conversion, Byrnes pointed out that he was not overly committed to organized religion, having attended no church regularly since leaving Charleston, and that he did not think the particular church at which one worshipped was very important in God's sight. Accordingly, he saw no harm in deferring to the stronger church ties of his wife's family. While such tolerant attitudes may have been sincere, Byrnes, an ambitious attorney eyeing politics with interest, must also have known that a Catholic had little chance of being elected to major political office in South Carolina. Whatever the case, opponents later accused Byrnes of political opportunism in switching churches. This accusation would surface at inopportune moments throughout his political career.²³

Admitting that "my heart and my ambitions were with law and politics," Byrnes launched that career in April 1908 when he became a candidate for circuit solicitor, an elective office with duties similar to those of district attorneys in other states. His opponents were Harry Graham, an attorney from Bamberg, and James E. Davis, the two term incumbent solicitor from Barnwell. Many people regarded it as a bold move for Byrnes, an attorney with virtually no trial experience, to

²¹ *Barnwell People*, July 17, 1902, March 12, 1903; Alsop and Kintner, "Sly and Able," p. 18; "The Reminiscences of Francis Perkins," *Columbia Oral History Collection*, V. 7, Part 3, p. 398, V. 8. part 2, p. 333.

²² *Barnwell People*, July 23, 1903; "Biographical Sketch of Maude Byrnes," "All in One Lifetime Draft," Walter Brown to Mary Brown, Feb. 28, 1973, Byrnes MSS; *Greenville News* June 12, 1941; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Sept. 3, 1909, April 7, 1916; *Barnwell People*, April 26, 1906.

²³ "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS.

challenge two opponents more seasoned than he. If so, however, it was not a reckless move for Byrnes knew he would be helped by his widespread popularity, the many powerful friends he had made in court, and the fact that Graham was a weak campaigner while Davis had been an ineffective solicitor plagued by alcohol problems; having once needed to be sobered up by a sheriff while in the middle of prosecuting a case.²⁴

Based on this knowledge, Byrnes had calculated his chances well. Throughout the summer, he pledged to reduce crime in the district and reverse Davis's poor conviction record. Meanwhile, Graham waged a listless campaign as anticipated while Davis was unable to appear at most campaign meetings because of health problems which many suspected were related to strong drink. The result was a relatively easy victory for Byrnes based on a strong favorite son vote in Aiken county.²⁵

But if the victory was easy, the challenge of being solicitor was formidable in a district once described as "the damndest, game-cockingest, liquor-drinkingest, nigger-shootingest, sinfullest place in South Carolina." True to its reputation, the district quickly gave Byrnes an opportunity to translate his editorial concerns with order and equal justice into practice. The result was a series of sensational cases, several of which touched on the raw nerve of race.²⁶

The first of these cases occurred in Barnwell where Byrnes prosecuted a white man, C. F. Baker, for the murder of a black barber named Julius Green. During the course of the trial several of Byrnes's witnesses testified that the two men had quarreled in the barber shop after which Baker left briefly, returned with a six-shooter, and fired four bullets into the unarmed barber's chest. "If you decide to acquit this man," Byrnes demanded of the jury, "I want you to be courageous enough to say why; just write on the verdict, 'Not Guilty — because it was a negro he killed.'" Three hours later, the jury returned with a verdict of not guilty on the grounds of self defense. As he left the courtroom one friendly juror gave Byrnes some advice. "I think you have one of the best futures politically of any young man I know," he said, "but if you keep on talking to juries the way you talked . . . this morning, some day a jury will convict a white man of killing a negro and then you will have ruined yourself." Henceforward, Byrnes never doubted the sensitivity of the racial issue in

²⁴ Byrnes to Annie King, April 17, 1967 "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS; *Barnwell People*, April 30, May 7, 1908.

²⁵ *Barnwell People*, July 23, 30, 1908; *Aiken Journal and Review*, April 30, July 21, Aug. 4, 1908. Frank E. Jordan, Jr., *The Primary State*, (Columbia, 1963) p. 144. After his election, Byrnes sold his interest in the *Journal and Review*. The final vote in the election was: Byrnes: 4,125; Davis: 1,756; Graham: 1,034.

²⁶ Alsop and Kintner, "Sly and Able," p. 19.

South Carolina. Even so, the solicitor was unconvinced that this type of "justice" was either necessary or inevitable.²⁷

Byrnes got a chance to try again in another murder case originating in Barnwell in the spring of 1909. In that case he prosecuted and got a conviction against Quitman Johnson, a black man who had wounded one white man, Marvin Holland, while killing another, Perry Ussery, at the Barnwell County Fair. Byrnes was pleased by the conviction but puzzled by Johnson's apparent lack of motive. Accordingly, he decided to question Johnson privately in jail whereupon the frightened black man reluctantly confessed that a white man had contracted with him for the killing; a fact that Johnson had not revealed in court out of fear that it might lead to retribution against his family. Based upon this new information, Byrnes conducted a thorough investigation with Pinkerton detectives which convinced him that Chester Kennedy, a wealthy white resident of Barnwell, had contracted with Johnson for the killing to avenge being outbid by Marvin Holland for a choice piece of land. The findings of Byrnes's investigation led to a lighter sentence for Johnson and an indictment as accessory to murder against Kennedy.²⁸

The ensuing Kennedy trial was one of the most dramatic in the district's history, involving as it did prosecuting one of the most prominent men in the area. Adding to the drama was the fact that Byrnes, who had gotten much of his evidence from the black community, somehow persuaded the court to allow those black witnesses to testify against the white defendant, a practice which Barnwell courts had seldom if ever before tolerated. The result was life imprisonment for Kennedy. The verdict, as one newspaper described it, was one of the "most memorable events in the annals of court in Barnwell County which hailed the beginning of a day when even prominent white men can be convicted of cowardly crimes." One citizen added, "Byrnes . . . continues to cover himself with glory . . . His argument in the . . . Kennedy trial was by far the best speech I have ever heard and I've heard all worthwhile for the past fifteen years."²⁹

Rather than rest on this favorable publicity, Byrnes plunged into another controversial case in Aiken during the summer of 1909. In that case, a black man, Levi Chavous, was accused of murdering a white man named C. S. Pringle. According to the sheriff's report, the two men had a longstanding feud over failure to complete payment on a rowboat; Chavous had threatened to kill Pringle if he ever again caught him

²⁷ *Barnwell People*, Feb. 18, March 25, 1909; "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS.

²⁸ *Aiken Journal and Review*, Dec. 4, 1908, July 30, 1909; *Barnwell People*, Dec. 3, 10, 1908, March 25, April 1, 1909; "Biographical Sketch," U. S. C. Archives.

²⁹ "Biographical Sketch," U. S. C. Archives; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Aug. 3, 1909.

fishing in the Savannah River. Several weeks later, Pringle disappeared. His hat was later found beside an unidentified human skull near the river, resulting in a murder indictment against Chavous. Although obligated to prosecute the case, Byrnes was unsatisfied with the evidence; pointing out that the body had never been found, that the skull could not be identified, and that accordingly it was impossible even to prove that Pringle was dead, much less that he had been murdered. Because of this lack of evidence, Byrnes asked for and received an acquittal of Chavous. The verdict was probably correct but that fact made it no less remarkable. Byrnes had persuaded a white jury to acquit a black man accused of killing a white man.³⁰

In an equally sensational case, Byrnes prosecuted Mark Duncan, a jealous textile mill worker accused of killing his wife's illicit lover, Will Brooks. At the trial, Duncan pleaded not guilty, claiming that he had never been to the place where Brook's partially decomposed body with a severed jugular vein had been found. However, Byrnes had secretly investigated the area and found tobacco tags of Duncan's brand at the scene of the crime. When Byrnes confronted Duncan with this evidence on cross-examination, he forced the witness into so many contradictions that it discredited his testimony. South Carolina juries often treated killing in adultery cases as justifiable homicide. But in this case, Byrnes's skillful detective work and cross-examination produced a conviction on charges of manslaughter.³¹

Each of these cases as well as others involving wife-beaters, backstabbers, and blazing gun battles over tavern girls made front-page news in the district. While establishing an eighty percent conviction ratio, Byrnes proved his legal talent, brought more order and equal justice to the district, and earned widespread praise for his efforts. He also catapulted himself into the political limelight.³²

Recognizing Byrnes's potential, powerful local politicians such as Daniel Henderson, former chairman of the Aiken County Democratic organization, encouraged the solicitor to run for the United States Congress in 1910. Needing little persuasion, Byrnes entered that race against Calvin Garris, a state legislator from Denmark, and James O. Patterson, the fifty-two year old, three-term incumbent from Barnwell. As in the solicitor's race of 1908, so in the congressional campaign of 1910, Byrnes was making a bold move in challenging two men more

³⁰ *Aiken Journal and Review*, Aug. 13, Oct. 12, 1909.

³¹ *Barnwell People*, Aug. 26, 1909; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Aug. 24, Oct. 5, 8, 1909; Alsop and Kintner, "Sly and Able," p. 44.

³² *Aiken Journal and Review*, May 27, Aug. 3, 6, 10, 24, Oct. 5, 8, 12, 1909; *Barnwell People*, May 27, Aug. 26, 1909; Alsop and Kintner, "Sly and Able," p. 44.

politically experienced than he; especially Patterson whose congressional seniority, wealth, and powerful family made him a formidable opponent.³³

But again, it was a well planned move that was not as reckless as it might have appeared. Byrnes had been told that Garris was a weak campaigner. He had also read that Patterson, a lackluster, congressman, suffered from a heart ailment that had kept him bed-ridden for much of the winter and could easily diminish his effectiveness on the campaign trail that summer. If his information was correct, Byrnes calculated that these factors, combined with his popularity and solicitor's reputation could provide the edge necessary for victory.³⁴

When the Democratic primary began in June, Byrnes's calculations proved to be accurate. Unclear positions on the issues and dull, rambling speeches quickly eliminated Garris as a serious contender. Lingering bad health prevented Patterson from making public appearances during the campaign. Capitalizing on the lethargy of his opponents, Byrnes delivered witty, well-informed, and thoughtful speeches which proclaimed that dynamic new leadership was needed to solve the serious problems of the district. Designed to improve the state's standard of living and restore it to a position of national leadership, Byrnes's platform called for lower tariffs, higher farm prices, better conditions for textile mill workers, federal aid to road construction, and improved public education. By citing his performance as solicitor, Byrnes argued that he was a man who could produce favorable results on these issues. By frequently noting Patterson's absence, Byrnes planted the impression that the congressman was unable to defend his undistinguished record or to provide constructive leadership in the future.³⁵

Stung by these criticisms and alarmed by the progress of the Byrnes campaign, Patterson launched a newspaper counterattack in early August. These paid advertisements listed several pork-barrel projects he had acquired for the district, blamed lack of additional accomplishments on the Republican dominated Congress, and cited lingering effects of malaria contracted while visiting flood victims in the district as the reason for his inability to campaign in public. Observing that Byrnes had two years remaining on his unexpired solicitor's term, Patterson operatives charged that the Aiken resident was too young and too ambitious to

³³ "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS; Jordan, *The Primary State*, pp. 100-101; Hemphill, *Men of Mark*, I., pp. 163-166, III., pp. 342-43.

³⁴ "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes MSS; *Barnwell People*, Feb. 17, 24, March 3, 10, May 12, 1910.

³⁵ *Columbia State*, July 9, 10, 1910; *Aiken Journal and Review*; July 12, 15, 19, Aug. 2, 1910; *Barnwell People*, July 14, 17, Aug. 10, 1910.

serve any interests other than his own. Despite this heated counterattack, Byrnes continued to make progress, especially among the textile mill workers whom he courted heavily in Aiken County's Horse Creek Valley. By early September, most savvy politicians considered the race to be too close to call.³⁶

However, on the eve of the election copies of a letter written over Byrnes typewritten name were circulated in major precincts. The letter questioned Patterson's religion and accused Garris of being a corrupt politician, an adulterer, and a "nigger lover." It closed with the pledge: "Remember this and I will take care of you. Work hard and vote often!" Byrnes denied responsibility for the letter and denounced it as a heavy-handed attempt to hurt him through reverse psychology but denial came too late to affect balloting in most precincts. With the letter apparently costing Byrnes some votes, Patterson accumulated a 500 vote plurality over his chief rival while Garris, who ran third, siphoned off enough votes to force a runoff between the two front runners.³⁷

In the two weeks prior to the second primary, Byrnes issued further denials in regard to the scurrilous letter and hired detectives who eventually discovered its author although the evidence was too circumstantial to take legal action. Garris, a friend of Byrnes, absolved him of any blame and even endorsed him in the runoff while Patterson wisely chose to let the issue die. Meanwhile, Byrnes recanvassed the district so effectively that one precinct eventually shifted all of its votes from Patterson to Byrnes.³⁸

Scurrilous letters and grass roots politics aside, there appear to have been broader factors influencing the outcome of the second primary. Zack McGee, the Washington correspondent of the *Columbia State*, viewed the race as a microcosm of the national "Progressive Movement" through which older, more conservative office-holders were being challenged by younger, more liberal politicians. As such, McGee argued that the outcome of the election would hinge on the question of whether the district wanted a safe but lethargic congressman or an untested but potentially creative one.³⁹

³⁶ *Beaufort Gazette*, Aug. 11, 18, 25, 1910; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Aug. 2, 23, 26, 1910. Byrnes was endorsed by newspapers in Aiken, Bamberg, Hampton, Barnwell, Saluda, and Estill.

³⁷ "Circular Letter," dated July 8, 1910, Byrnes MSS; *Columbia State*, Aug. 28, 1910; *Aiken Journal and Review*, Aug. 2, 25, 1910; Jordan, *The Primary State*, p. 101. The totals were Patterson: 5,391; Byrnes: 4,897; Garris: 2,355.

³⁸ *Aiken Journal and Review*, Sept. 6, 1910; *Beaufort Gazette*, Sept. 8, 1910; "All in One Lifetime Draft," Byrnes to Calhoun Thomas, Jan. 29, 1968, Byrnes MSS.

³⁹ The McGee article is reprinted in the *Beaufort Gazette*, June 16, 1910.

By mid-September, the answer to that question began to form. Whether fairly or not, some voters identified Patterson with an older generation of leadership that was either unwilling or unable to cope effectively with the serious problems of the twentieth century south. Attacking Patterson in this vein, one citizen wrote:

The South has long . . . been throttled in its progress because its citizenship have continued to worship at the shrine of a remnant of the passing aristocracy who have never outgrown the self-contentment and inactivity which they learned in antebellum days.

Similarly, another "South Carolinian" urged the Palmetto state to abandon "worn-out politicians" and replace them with new men more capable of "honestly, courageously, and intelligently facing the future."⁴⁰

Increasingly, many of his constituents felt that Byrnes could be such a man. Indeed, if George Tindall's generalizations about Southern "Progressive" politicians are reasonably accurate, Byrnes fit the mold well. Like them, he "came from elements of upward social mobility rather than established families." Like them, he synthesized elements of "Bourbonism" and "Agrarianism" into a platform of moderate reform designed to bring order, modernization and consensus to Southern society while challenging neither its basic structure nor alienating advocates of either of the earlier movements. On a political as well as a policy level, such an approach made good sense in an under-developed state whose social progress had often been stymied by factional strife since the 1880s. Perhaps it also emerged logically from the childhood interplay between the "common" world of his mother and the aristocratic world of Ben Rutledge.⁴¹

At any rate, when combined with Byrnes's charm, effectiveness as solicitor, and image as a self-made man, this mixture prompted an "Edgefield Voter" to rhapsodize:

He [Byrnes] stands for the government of the many and special privileges to none. His position is on the side of the millions of sons of toil held in bondage by the merciless few. He stands for a regenerate society . . . of which he himself is a worthy example.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Aiken Journal and Review*, Aug. 23, Sept. 6, 1910.

⁴¹ "Progressivism" is a slippery term that does not lend itself to unqualified definitions. The literature on that subject is enormous. However, perhaps the best short analysis of Southern Progressive politicians is George Tindall, *The Persistent Tradition in New South Politics* (Baton Rouge, 1975) especially pp. 48-72.

⁴² *Aiken Journal and Review*, Aug. 23, 1910.

In part at least, it seems to have been Byrnes's ability to project such an image that provided the edge necessary to defeat a seasoned, incumbent congressman. Based on a 900 vote majority in Aiken County, much of which came from textile mill precincts, Byrnes defeated Patterson by fifty-eight votes. "I campaigned on nothing but gall," Byrnes grinned, "and gall won by fifty-eight votes."⁴³

The implications of Byrnes's exciting victory provoked more than the usual amount of hopeful speculation from political observers weary from a procession of ineffective legislators. William E. Gonzales, the reform-minded editor of the *Columbia State*, wrote cautiously, "We hope he will rise to unusual prominence in the American Commons. South Carolina sorely needs prominence in Washington, and the future career of Mr. Byrnes will be observed with hopeful interest." Less cautiously, J. C. Hemphill of the *Charleston News and Courier* predicted:

He [Byrnes] will not only look after the interests of his district but . . . will become an earnest student of the political questions of the day and will . . . reflect credit upon the state at large . . . the career which now opens before him is bright with the promise of usefulness and honor.⁴⁴

Based on Byrnes's early years, Hemphill's editorial seemed to have foundation in fact. From his immigrant family and his aristocratic mentor in Charleston, Byrnes had developed a fierce ambition to excel in the eyes of both. As part of that quest, he had cultivated a quick mind, an engaging personality, and an opportunistic talent for thrusting himself ahead. Growing up in the "atmosphere of politics," Byrnes predictably chose it as his vehicle for success and mastered its practical talents well in the communities of the second district. Guiding those talents was a desire to promote social order and political concensus among different groups so as to advance mutually beneficial, if moderate, reforms. If achieved, this program was designed to modernize the south and restore it to positions of national leadership without jeopardizing its basic social, economic, and racial structure.

"Bright with promise" in 1910, Byrnes's position was close to the vanguard of southern "Progressive" politics. Given the history and political realities of the region, probably few Southern politicians of the day could have hoped to propose much more even if they had desired to

⁴³ *Columbia State*, Sept. 15-17, 1910; Byrnes, p. 21; Jordan, *The Primary State*, p. 101. The totals were Byrnes: 6,248; Patterson: 6,190.

⁴⁴ Gonzales is quoted in Jean T. Carlisle, "The State's Editorial Policy Relative to South Carolina, 1903-1913," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association, 1951*, p. 38; Hemphill is quoted in *Aiken Journal and Review*, Sept. 27, 1910.

try. Structured in this manner, Byrnes's political strategy for a new consensus in Southern affairs changed little over the next forty-five years. During that time, this strategy helped him to obtain many constructive reforms, bring the south closer to the national mainstream, and make himself perhaps the most influential southern politician of his era. Yet eventually that same strategy, which did not permit going much beyond the southern consensus amidst rapidly changing national ideas on labor and race relations, ironically helped to keep the south outside the national mainstream, foil Byrnes's ambitions for the vice-presidency, and tarnish the brightness of his national reputation. Many, if not all, of these themes of his national career had their roots in the events of his early life that led him to Congress by 1910.⁴⁵

But in the autumn of 1910, the promise was still new and bright. Jimmy Byrnes was going to Washington and he was eager to make the most of it.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed analysis of Byrnes's career through 1941, see Winfred B. Moore, Jr., "New South Statesman: The Political Career of James Francis Byrnes, 1911-1941," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1975).