

ROBERT C. BYRD

WEST VIRGINIAN OF THE CENTURY

by Charlotte Weber

When the West Virginia Legislature is in session, the rotunda of the state Capitol in Charleston can be a crowded, noisy place, one where silk-suited lobbyists, cell phones tucked in their ears, regularly rub shoulders with everyday folks—men in worn blue jeans, work shirts and their favorite ball caps, women in simple dresses—all trying their best to get the lawmakers to do their bidding.

“ ... make no mistake about it, when Byrd speaks, people listen.”

In contrast, when the Legislature is not in session, the rotunda generally presents a deserted, lonely aspect. The footsteps of a solitary visitor echo down the marble hallway.

The visitor stops and silently contemplates a feature of the Capitol rotunda that never changes. There, day in and day out, a bigger-than-life bronze statue of Robert C. Byrd stands guard, the statue's eyes keeping silent watch in much the same way that the living, breathing Byrd has so long kept careful watch over the West Virginia he loves so much.

The term “legend” is one that's been much cheapened by overuse. It's a term the media are quick to apply to any ballplayer with more than a handful of successful seasons or a pop singer or film star whose appeal has transcended the years. Nonetheless, there are real legends—distinctive individuals who have made their mark in such exemplary, praiseworthy fashion that they stand out among even the most exalted of their contemporaries.

Certainly Robert Carlyle Byrd is such an individual.

Were a Hollywood moviemaker looking for an actor to play a powerful member of the U.S. Senate in an upcoming film, he would do well to seek out one who looks—and sounds—like Byrd. He looks younger than his 84 years. Still fit and trim, he's always impeccably dressed, his silver hair combed just so. He's meticulous and dignified in both his speech and his habits. His keen mind is as sharp as the proverbial tack and his voice is firm and rich. And, make no mistake about it, when Byrd speaks, people listen.

Robert C. Byrd has become a political legend by winning the confidence of West Virginia voters over and over again. The veteran Democrat has never lost an election.

After serving first in the House of Delegates and then in the state Senate, Byrd was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1952, serving three terms in that body. In 1958, he ran for the U.S. Senate and won by a substantial majority, thus becoming the only West Virginian ever to serve in both houses of the West Virginia Legislature and both houses of the U.S. Congress.

Byrd entered the Senate on January 3, 1959, and has served the state of West Virginia continuously in that institution ever since, winning re-election again and again by record margins. He has served longer in the Senate than anyone else in West Virginia's history. In the 1976 general election, Byrd had no opposition, thus becoming the first person in West Virginia history to win a Senate seat without opposition in a general election. Even though he had no opponent on the ballot, Byrd received an impressive 566,359 votes.

In 2000, West Virginia voters elected Byrd to an eighth consecutive six-year term in the Senate, making him the only person in Senate history to achieve that milestone. He has carried all 55 West Virginia counties several times and, amazingly, in the 2000 general election carried all but seven of the state's 1,970 precincts.

Little wonder that in May 2001, Gov. Bob Wise and the West Virginia Legislature honored Byrd by naming him "West Virginian of the 20th Century." Byrd has called that title "my greatest honor" ever.

As a result of his many years of service, Byrd holds the distinction of having cast more roll call votes than any other U.S. Senator in history—more than 16,000 of them. And, through decades of careful

study and effort, he has become the acknowledged expert on the Senate's history, its tradition and its coveted rulebook. Byrd the historian has produced a four-volume history of the Senate. Byrd the traditionalist frequently takes to the Senate floor to protest what he sees as any affront to the upper chamber's governmental role. And Byrd—the master of parliamentary procedure—has bewildered and frustrated many a political foe so foolish as to underestimate him.

Byrd's knowledge of the rules and procedures of the Senate is very much part of his legend. Byrd himself has recalled that in 1967, when he was elected Secretary of the Senate Democratic Conference, "I began to study the book of precedents and the book of rules and soon came to know something about floor work. As a result, I became proficient in the use of the rules."

Citing Byrd's recollection of how he started studying the 1,600-page Senate rule book, his good friend and Senate colleague Sam Nunn has observed, "Saying that Robert Byrd is proficient in the rules is like saying Rembrandt knew something about painting. I suspect there have been few members of the Senate in the last 200 years who approached Senator Byrd's knowledge of the rules and precedents of the Senate."

The *Almanac of American Politics* says Robert C. Byrd "may come closer to the kind of senator the Founding Fathers had in mind than any other."

Not bad for a poor boy from the West Virginia coalfields.

Actually, Byrd wasn't born in West Virginia. And his birth name wasn't Byrd. The future senator was born Cornelius Calvin Sale, Jr., in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, on November 20, 1917. His mother died in the great 1918 influenza epidemic that swept the country. Honoring his wife's dying wish, his father, a furniture factory worker with four older children to rear, gave the baby boy to his sister, Vlurma Sale, and her husband, Titus Dalton Byrd, whose only child had died. They renamed the boy and moved to West Virginia.

Byrd was too young when his mother died to remember her, and he didn't know his brothers, Reuben, Clyde, and William, or his one sister, Mrs. Clara Scroggs, all of North Carolina, until he was grown. In fact, his earliest memories are of Bluefield, West Virginia, where

his foster father drove a wagon and team for a local brewery. Then, the Byrd family moved to Landgraff in McDowell County, on the banks of the Elkhorn Branch of the Tug Fork, where Mr. Byrd worked in the mines. Next the family moved to Algonquin in Mercer County—later called Lamar—where the elder Byrd again mined coal and young Robert started school.

Of his foster father, Byrd recalls, “I’ve met kings and shahs and princes and princesses, presidents and senators,” but he was “one of the greatest men I ever met in my life.” He “never bought me a cap buster or a firecracker. He bought me a watercolor set or a drawing tablet, some pencils and crayons, and said, ‘If you get a whipping in school . . . I’m going to whip you. And I want you to make good grades.’ And when I made them, he was proud.”

His foster mother, the senator remembers, “never kissed me in all the years that I was with her . . . but she loved me. She was tough. I saw her take a gun and shoot a black snake, saw her shoot at a groundhog. I believe she was the hardest worker I ever saw in my life. Deeply religious but not a fanatic . . . she put it into real life.”

At Algonquin, the Byrds lived in a company house on a hillside above the railroad track. There his foster mother took in other miners as boarders to add to the family’s income. Every morning before dawn she was up to pack lunch buckets for her boarders, and every evening at the end of the day’s work, with no plumbing in the house, she carried in water from an outside spigot and heated it on the stove for the miners to bathe away the grime and dust they had accumulated in the mines.

Poor but possessed of a keen mind, young Robert finished the first four grades at Algonquin in two years. Then his foster father decided to try farming and so moved the family to a rock-filled hillside farm on Wolf Creek in Mercer County, where Robert attended a two-room school and later the school at Spanishburg, also in Mercer County.

With his books, some cornbread and pork in a paper bag, and a jar of milk for lunch, young Robert walked three miles down the hollow each morning to catch a school bus to Spanishburg, and then walked back up the hollow on his return. Studying by an oil lamp, he memorized whole pages of his textbooks. And in summer time, he hoed corn on

the steep hillsides, “bugged” beans, milked the cow, and peddled chickens, eggs and vegetables in the local mining communities.

But Mr. Byrd could scratch only a meager living from the farm’s rocky soil and so, frustrated, he decided to return to the mines, this time moving the family to Stotesbury in Raleigh County.

Times were tough. Byrd remembers Christmases “when there wasn’t a present in the house, not even a stick of candy.” Despite the family’s strong religious faith, Byrd recalls there was a period when he didn’t go to Sunday school because he was embarrassed that he had no socks to wear:

“I remember Mr. W.P. Myers, the owner of the company store at Stotesbury where my dad worked in the mines, said, ‘Bob, why don’t you come to Sunday school?’ I said, ‘Mr. Myers, I don’t have any socks to wear.’ He said, ‘Well, come back here.’ He took me back to the dry-goods counter, told Mrs. Ella Light or somebody who was there, ‘Give this lad a couple of pairs of socks.’ They gave me a couple of pairs of socks and I went to Sunday school.”

Each day after school, young Robert went from house to house, collecting food scraps from neighbors to feed the pigs that his foster father raised in a pen beside the railroad tracks. As he walked, a pail in each hand, the scraps would slop out and stain his jeans.

“I didn’t smell very nice,” he says.

But Mark Twain High School at Stotesbury was an excellent school and, encouraged by his foster parents and teachers, Robert again threw himself in his studies. He not only read every book he could get his hands on, he learned to play the violin in the school orchestra and in 1934, at the age of 16, he graduated as valedictorian of his class.

Jobs were few in Depression-era West Virginia, but W.P. Myers, who had made sure young Robert had socks to wear to Sunday school, pulled some strings and found the new graduate a job working at a filling station. His salary: \$50 a month. Byrd had to walk from his house to the station every morning, a distance of roughly four miles that seemed even longer in winter.

“Some mornings I was lucky and got a ride on the bread truck,” Byrd recalls.

His foster mother again was earning some extra money by taking in miners as lodgers. One of the miners loaned Byrd his overcoat and a hat to wear. He had none of his own.

Later, Myers was able to put Byrd to work at the company store in Stotesbury as a produce clerk. With a grand raise of \$5 per month over what he had been earning at the filling station, Byrd and his high school sweetheart, Erma, married and set up housekeeping in two upstairs rooms of a company house. Byrd still has some of his old pay stubs from those days and, leafing through them, recalls there were many times when his charges at the company store totaled more than his meager pay. The young couple's first refrigerator wasn't even an icebox, but half an orange crate nailed outside the kitchen window. They had no car. If they had to drive somewhere they had to ask Erma's father if they could borrow his.

But, always trying to better his situation, Byrd worked his way through a meat cutter's manual at night, learning to be a butcher, and, with his new abilities, he moved ahead into jobs as head meat cutter at Stanaford, Mount Hope, and Montgomery. In 1941, he became head of the meat department of the Carolina Supermarket at Crab Orchard in Raleigh County, near Beckley, at a starting salary of \$100 a month.

Next, he took a welding course at Beckley Junior College and spent the World War II years working as a welder, helping build "Liberty" and "Victory" ships at shipyards in Baltimore, Maryland, and Tampa, Florida.

"I grew up knowing how difficult it was to find a job," Byrd recalls. "Having found one, working hard to keep it, enjoying my work, whatever my work was, I gave it my best. If I was working as a produce salesman, I gave it my best. If I was working as a meat cutter, I tried to be the best. ... As a welder in the shipyard, I tried to be the best welder. And, as a student, I tried to be the best student. I've always given it my best."

It was in the shipyards of World War II that Byrd first became interested in politics and, returning home to West Virginia seasoned by his new experiences and outlook, he found himself enthusiastically envisioning the exciting possibilities for the state in the postwar world.

"At war's end," he says, "I returned to West Virginia with a new vision of what my home state and my country could be."

And so, on February 13, 1946, Byrd paid a \$10 filing fee and, for the first time, became a candidate for election. He ran for one of Raleigh County's seats in the West Virginia House of Delegates. He had no previous political experience, but he campaigned hard—and entertained political rallies with "Goin' Up Cripple Creek" and some of the other fiddle tunes he'd learned to play as a boy.

Byrd recalls: "Some of my friends said I could not win because I had no money and no connections. I took my violin under my arm and everywhere I went I played two or three tunes to get attention, after which I would make my little speeches. It has been said that I fiddled my way into the state Legislature. Perhaps so."

He ended up winning the election overwhelmingly and repeated that triumph in 1948, winning a second term. And in 1950, he was elected to a seat in the state Senate, representing Raleigh and Wyoming counties.

While a member of the Legislature, Byrd achieved two more important objectives: Through long hours of hard work and saving, he managed to open his own grocery store at Sophia in Raleigh County. And, 16 years after his high school graduation, he enrolled as a student at Morris Harvey College (now the University of Charleston), determined to get the college education that his poverty had denied him as a youth. He later took courses at Marshall College (now Marshall University) in Huntington and Concord College in Athens. He earned straight A's at each school, carrying the maximum number of courses allowed, while, with wife Erma's help, he continued to operate his grocery store and carry on his legislative duties.

Later, after his election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1952, Byrd enrolled at George Washington University in Washington to study law at night. Following his election to the U.S. Senate in 1958, he determined to complete his law degree as quickly as possible. To do that, he transferred to American University in Washington; and, despite the rigorous daily schedule in the Senate, he pored over his law books at night and on weekends.

Regarding his law studies, Byrd had said, "It was as hard a task as I have ever had. There was no time for leisure—no time for anything but work, work, work." But in June 1963, when Byrd was 45 years old—and with high school 29 years behind him—Byrd graduated from American University's College of Law, *cum laude*. After 10 years of attending law school at night, he finally had earned his law degree.

Never before in history had a sitting member of either the Senate or the House accomplished the feat of beginning and completing the courses of study leading to a law degree while serving in Congress. Thus, when Byrd addresses a high school or college commencement audience, he speaks from personal experience when he stresses the accomplishments that young people can achieve and the obstacles they can overcome if they are willing to work hard enough and long enough.

"If I can do it, you can too," he tells his young audiences.

In 1983, Byrd was presented the prestigious Horatio Alger Award—an honor that placed him in the distinguished company of Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, the Rev. Mr. Billy Graham and West Virginia's own Pearl S. Buck. The award honors those who have taken advantage of America's opportunities to forge successful careers.

In an editorial congratulating Byrd on receiving the Horatio Alger Award, the Beckley *Register-Herald* correctly called Byrd's remarkable record of achievement "a beacon to the youth of West Virginia. His success proves that one need not acquiesce to the circumstances of one's beginnings, and that America is indeed a nation which rewards the efforts of those who have the heart and desire to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps."

Cynical souls sometimes ask those around Byrd "what's he *really* like?" They refuse to accept the simple fact that the public Byrd and the private Byrd are exactly the same. If you want to figure out what makes some politicians tick, you have to peel away their surface, layer by layer, much like peeling an onion. Not so with Byrd. As those who know him well can testify, he is exactly what he seems.

"Senator [Robert C.] Byrd works 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year helping the people of West Virginia. He is the champion of the interests of the people of West Virginia."

That's high praise, especially considering that it came from the other side of the political aisle—from then-Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole, R-Kansas.

Dole took the Senate floor to praise Byrd in July of 1995 when the West Virginia senator cast his 14,000th Senate vote—a "yes" for the Ryan White Act supporting AIDS research. Since then, of course, Byrd has added more than 2,000 additional votes to that impressive total.

"The Senate is my life," Byrd has frequently said.

And certainly the senator's life away from Capitol Hill is plain, even Spartan by some standards. He shuns the fancy lunches, dinners and cocktail parties that are so much a part of official life in Washington.

"My wife fixes me a little lunch and I bring it in a brown bag," Byrd told the Charleston *Daily Mail* in a 1990 interview. "Sometimes it's bologna. Sometimes it's boiled ham, a couple of slices of bread, a piece of cheese, perhaps a little cookie, carrots or celery, tomato and a jar of milk. I save money and I save time."

In the same interview, Byrd said he does his share of the housework at home. "I mop the kitchen floor, and I mop the utility floor, and I mop the bathrooms, and I help dust the furniture. I do the vacuuming. And why not? It's good exercise for me."

The Byrds have no mortgage. They bought their modest home in suburban McLean, Virginia, for \$135,000 in cash in 1973. "I don't fool with credit cards," Byrd told the *Daily Mail*. "I don't owe for my house. I don't owe for my car. I don't owe any money. That's the way my wife and I have always approached it. When I got into politics, I knew I'd never be rich. That wasn't my goal. But I've tried to work hard and we've tried to save. I do think people ought to save more. Ben Franklin said, 'A penny saved is a penny earned.' That's right. It's easy to spend and hard to get."

Byrd takes no vacations, has never held a golf club in his hand and can count on the fingers of one hand the number of football or baseball games he's ever attended. ("When I've seen one, I've seen them all.")

On a Friday afternoon, Byrd will take home as many as five leather briefcases crammed with job-related materials to work on over

the weekend. It's said that when a newspaper interviewer seemed skeptical about this, Byrd fetched the five cases from a closet and lined them up on his desk for the doubting reporter to see.

"Work for me is leisure," Byrd says.

He watches little television, although he once took to the Senate floor to complain when his favorite show, "Gunsmoke," was canceled. He says that his favorite movie is 1970's "Patton," with George C. Scott as the colorful World War II general.

This is a man who, in an attempt to broaden his vocabulary, once read through an entire unabridged dictionary, page by page—and says he would like to find the time to do it again.

Byrd's life outside the Senate mostly centers on his family.

"Before family values became a bumper sticker, Senator Byrd personified family values," says Congressman Nick J. Rahall, who started his Washington career by sorting the mail in Byrd's office and now represents West Virginia's 3rd District in the House of Representatives.

The senator and his wife, Erma Ora Byrd, have been married for more than 60 years. And it's clear he treasures the time he can spend at home with her, or with their two married daughters and their husbands, their grandchildren and, now, great-grandchildren.

"Whatever I have been able to accomplish," he says, "I could not have done it without the happy home that my wife and daughters have done so much to provide."

Erma Byrd is the senator's closest confidante and by all accounts his most trusted adviser. "She is not only my wife, but also my best counselor," says Byrd. "She is a hard worker, a voracious reader, a dedicated mother, wife and grandmother, a forceful advocate for her view, a bastion of steady, clear-headed common sense."

If being a member of the Senate requires stamina, a devotion to duty and a willingness to shoulder responsibility, being the spouse of a senator demands all those things and more. Erma Byrd has never failed to faithfully fulfill that role.

Senate sessions sometimes drag on long into the night. When that happens, jokes Senator Jay Rockefeller, "Mrs. Byrd often comes to our rescue. The Senator will indicate that she is waiting for him at

home and that she will not go to bed until he is home, whereupon the Senate is almost always immediately adjourned."

Byrd credits one of his granddaughters as helping inspire his monumental four-volume history, *The Senate, 1789-1989*.

He recalls that, when he first became Senate Majority Leader, he promised the members that there would be no voting on Fridays, thus giving them a bit more time for weekend trips back home.

On a Friday in 1980, Byrd made a speech in the mostly empty Senate chamber. His audience was a class of fifth-graders. The group included one of his granddaughters, Mary Anne Moore. He said he wanted to give the class something to talk about when they returned to school, so he spoke extemporaneously on the history of the Senate.

The next Friday, Mary Anne's older sister, Mona Byrd Moore, appeared with her class. Their father accompanied both. Byrd gave a second speech on Senate history. Since the father had heard the first speech, Byrd made the second one different. The two speeches were well received. Byrd was encouraged to make more, which he did. And, with help from the Senate Historian's office, the speeches eventually were collected and published in book form.

Not surprisingly, Byrd reads widely, though he eschews the books on the best-seller list in favor of the classics, such as Plato and Plutarch. But his favorite book, he is quick to say, is the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

Asked to name his favorite song, Byrd is equally quick to cite "Amazing Grace," an old hymn he's been known to sing when appearing at some function. His voice is surprisingly powerful—perhaps a result of his many long Senate orations. If there's someone to play the piano for him, that's helpful but not required. The senator knows the hymn well. It is, in a sense, the soundtrack of his life.

Over the years, Byrd has spoken in churches of all denominations in West Virginia. In 1970, in acknowledgment of his character and his services, the Knights of Columbus presented him with its first "Citizenship Award."

Byrd's interest in the church predates his entry into politics. Beginning in the mid-1940's, he taught a boys' Sunday school class at the Crab Orchard Baptist Church. Later, as a young man, he built an

adult Sunday school class from an initial six members to several hundred members in just a year's time, doing so by going personally from door to door and inviting people who belonged to no church to attend his class.

Thus, when Byrd talks about the virtues of hard work, family values and faith in God, he isn't playing a role of some kind. That's exactly the way he has endeavored to live his life.

Not that Byrd, by his own admission, hasn't made mistakes.

A brief flirtation with the Ku Klux Klan almost put an end to his political career. When he was campaigning for the House of Representatives in 1952, the election saw the revelation that Byrd had briefly been a KKK member as a young man in the early 1940's.

"I abhor the Klan," Byrd says today. "Every time I see on television men wearing robes, it turns me off. I look upon the Klan as a silly, asinine group that tries to act outside the law, and uses violence and intimidation as their currency. It is utterly silly and juvenile, a guy out there with sheets on trying to intimidate and threaten violence."

"But in the period and environment I grew up in," he continues, "I didn't see anything against the Klan; it was for flag, God, country, and it was against Communism."

The 1952 voters chose not to punish Byrd for what he describes as the mistake he most regrets in life. And although Byrd's critics take great delight in regularly dredging up his KKK membership, they're generally unable to stir up much in the way of public indignation.

As the late Don Marsh, longtime editor of *The Charleston Gazette*, once observed about the senator's fling with the KKK: "We all do dumb things when we're young. We're allowed to forget them if we don't run for office."

Byrd admits to few other mistakes in his long political career—although he has cited at least two of his thousands of votes that he would like to take back and change if he could. One, he says, was his vote against the 1964 Civil Rights Act. "I felt at the time that it was unconstitutional. But I since have regretted that vote." The other, he says, was deregulation of the airline industry, which has devastated airline service to West Virginia and other small, rural states.

But it's clear that Byrd has few regrets about his half-century on Capitol Hill. Nor should he, given the fact that his has been a career crowned with extraordinary success.

When Byrd entered the Senate in 1959, he was singled out by then-Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas and named to the prestigious Committee on Appropriations, the Senate's most important committee. At that time, it was an almost unheard-of assignment for a freshman Senator—and one that, in future years, would generate huge rewards for the people of West Virginia.

Byrd fulfilled the early expectations of his Senate colleagues. As he forged a reputation for effectively representing the needs and interests of West Virginians, he won the respect and admiration of other Senators. As a result, in 1967, he was named to the Senate leadership for the first time when his colleagues selected him as Secretary of the Senate Democratic Conference. He subsequently won unanimous re-election to that post in 1969.

In January 1971, Byrd defeated the incumbent Senate Democratic Whip, none other than Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts. Byrd's capture of the job—the No. 2 job in the Senate leadership—was portrayed by some in the media and elsewhere as an overnight coup. But in fact Byrd's "overnight coup" was years in the making. In the four years he had been Secretary of the Democratic Conference, Byrd typically had worked 14 hours a day, six days a week, functioning as Majority Leader Mike Mansfield's *de facto* right-hand man.

The party whip makes certain that members are present for important votes and, just as important, also makes sure they vote the way the leadership wants. The job requires an individual who can be both tough and tactful.

William Safire, in his *Safire's New Political Dictionary*, notes that the word comes from the "whipper-in," a man assigned to keep the hounds from straying in a fox hunt and was turned into a political term in England in the 18th Century. Safire quotes Benjamin Disraeli as saying the job required a "consummate knowledge of human nature, the most amiable flexibility and complete self-control."

Byrd, who certainly combined all those skills, was unanimously re-elected Democratic Whip in 1973 and 1975.

Veteran Montana Sen. Mansfield chose not to run again in the 1976 election and so, when the Senate convened in January 1977, Byrd was elected Majority Leader. For the next 12 years, he would serve as Majority Leader for six years (1977-80 and 1987-88) and as Minority Leader for six years (1981-86), as control of the Senate changed hands between the Democrats and the Republicans.

His election as the Majority Leader was not, however, the first time that Byrd was considered for a position of national significance. In the fall of 1971, the White House confirmed that Byrd was under active consideration by President Nixon for appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. Even though a Supreme Court nomination would have been a great honor, Byrd asked the White House to withdraw his name from further consideration, saying he felt he might better serve West Virginia and the nation by remaining in the Senate.

In 1989, Byrd relinquished his post as Senate Majority Leader to assume the chairmanship of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee. Also in 1989, he was unanimously elected President Pro Tempore of the Senate, a post that placed him third in line of succession to the presidency and gave him the distinction of having held more leadership positions in the Senate than any other Senator of any party in Senate history.

In walking away from the Majority Leader post, Byrd gave up one of the perceived most powerful jobs in Washington. But, in taking over as chairman of Appropriations, he would be in an ideal spot to direct federal dollars and programs to West Virginia. And from the first he made it clear he intended to do exactly that.

Federal money poured into West Virginia for everything from roads to research, from computer technology to a unique radio telescope. In perhaps his greatest feat, Byrd convinced the Federal Bureau of Investigation to move its fingerprint center—and its 2,700 jobs—from downtown Washington to a site near Clarksburg.

His efforts on behalf of West Virginia have won Byrd a legion of critics and the mocking title “Prince of Pork.”

Byrd shrugs off the criticism.

“West Virginia’s been short-changed,” he says. “Those people over there, those hillbillies, do you think they need roads? West

Virginia? No, but here in the District of Columbia, inside the Beltway, that’s where it’s needed. It isn’t pork here,” he says sarcastically.

“Liberating” is how Jay Rockefeller described Byrd’s shift from Majority Leader to Appropriations chair. “He’s out from under running the business of the Senate and sees himself on a mission to help the state.”

Byrd indeed seemed to be relieved to be out of the pressure cooker that is the Majority Leader’s job. In a 1990 interview, he told the *Sunday Gazette-Mail*:

Senate leader is a tough, tough job. The pressure was tremendous. To a considerable extent it was a thankless position. All my colleagues wanted something. They wanted to get out on Fridays to go back to their states. They wanted late votes on Mondays or Tuesdays. They wanted to leave to raise money. The average seat now costs \$4 million an election. It’s a rat race.

In June 2001, the surprise defection of Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords enabled the Democrats to regain control of the Senate. That meant Byrd regained the chairmanship of the Senate Appropriations Committee and was re-elected President Pro Tempore.

Byrd himself greeted that dramatic turn of events philosophically.

“It’s not like it was,” he said. “Having the chairmanship is fine, but there is no money. We won’t have money for new sewers and water systems; we won’t be able to respond to the critical needs of our country. Priorities will have to be carefully chosen. We can’t do it with the freedom we did in the past. There are more difficult times now.”

Although it’s his role as chairman of the Appropriations Committee that generally lands Byrd in the headlines, he also serves on three other important Senate committees:

- The Armed Services Committee, which studies and reviews all programs and initiatives that pertain to the nation’s defense.
- The Rules Committee, which acts as an oversight committee of the Senate itself, typically working on issues pertaining to elections and candidate qualifications.
- And the Budget Committee, which each year establishes the parameters for federal spending.

Byrd has three offices and three staffs—one due him as Senator from West Virginia, one accorded to the Appropriations Committee

chairman and one given the President Pro Tempore. And, yes, he manages to keep all three staffs more than busy.

It seems fair to say that no other individual has had the kind of impact on West Virginia that Byrd has had. A measure of that impact can be seen by the many things in the state that are named for him. No one really knows—not even Byrd’s hard-working staff—how many there are.

They include the Robert C. Byrd Drive, a four-lane highway stretching the seven miles from Beckley to tiny Sophia, where the Senator once sold groceries. There’s the Robert C. Byrd Hardwood Technologies Center in Princeton and the Robert C. Byrd Bridge linking downtown Huntington and Chesapeake, Ohio. Then there’s the Robert C. Byrd Locks and Dam on the Ohio River near Gallipolis, Ohio; the Robert C. Byrd Highway connecting Interstate 78 and Elkins; the Robert C. Byrd High School in Harrison County, and the Robert C. Byrd Visitor Center at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. And that’s only a brief sampling.

Byrd says he’s flattered.

“Never do I undertake any task with the notion that some facility will bear my name,” he says. “However, when West Virginians have chosen to recognize my work by naming various facilities after me, I have been deeply honored by their thoughtfulness.”

At Marshall University, Byrd has helped direct federal money into a long list of projects, including the John Deaver Drinko Library, the MU Autism Training Center and the MU Forensic Science Center. Three Marshall projects carry his name—Robert C. Byrd Institute for Advanced Flexible Manufacturing, the Robert C. Byrd Institute for Composites and Technology Training and the Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health. And now on the drawing board with a 2005 scheduled opening at Marshall is the future Robert C. Byrd Biotechnology Science Center, for which he has obtained \$35.6 million in federal funding.

In 1994, Marshall honored Byrd by awarding him, not an honorary degree, but a full-fledged earned bachelor of arts degree in political science. The degree was made possible by combining the courses that Byrd completed at Marshall nearly 40 years earlier with those he

completed at other state schools. The resulting total represented more than enough credit hours to qualify him for the degree.

“I’m delighted to say I’m a graduate from Marshall,” says Byrd.

Byrd’s Marshall degree is an uncommon tribute. But then Byrd is an uncommon man.

Speaking on the Marshall campus in 1996, Byrd urged students, “Read and learn. Make it a lifelong avocation. Put your family at the top of your list of priorities. Keep your values squarely in front of you at all times. Be loyal and supportive of those who are worthy of support. Be frugal and prudent and don’t waste life’s scarce resources. Love West Virginia and understand that it has made you special.”

This, of course, is exactly how Robert C. Byrd has endeavored to live his life and is what has made him one of the most influential and respected political figures in the history of West Virginia and these United States.

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