

What Democrats can learn from legacy of Senator Yarborough

by Harley Schlanger

In May 1993, at the age of 90, Ralph Webster Yarborough, former Democratic U.S. senator from Texas, called to ask that I make a change in the text of a message he had written to a Schiller Institute conference which was to take place in Germany in June. "I've been thinking about what I wrote, and I don't think it's strong enough," he said, referring to his statement which condemned Serbian genocide against Bosnia, and advocated U.S. military actions against the Serbs. "One thing I've learned from my years in Texas politics," he added, "is that if you're going to say something, you'd better be sure they know where you stand."

There was never any danger that the foes of Ralph Yarborough would not know where he stood. Throughout a career in politics which began in the 1930s, Yarborough never sacrificed his principles for short-term popularity. He never shrank from battle against the political establishment in Texas, remaining true to a maxim of one of his heroes, Sam Houston, who said, "Do right, and take the consequences."

Yarborough passed away on Jan. 27, at the age of 92, in Austin, Texas. A review of his accomplishments offers a testament to his courage and his decency, his combativity and his compassion, and can serve as a guide to many in his party today who have opted for the easy way out, to the detriment of themselves, their party, and the nation.

In an interview in December 1994, Yarborough blasted those Democrats who argued, in the aftermath of the November 1994 Gingrich "revolution," that Democrats must "heed the message of the voters" and act to limit government. Instead, he said, the party must "go back to Democratic principles." These include "an emphasis on education, on jobs, on economic growth, on the government improving conditions for the people. . . . If the Democratic Party abandons those principles, the Democratic Party has lost its soul."

Yarborough began his career in politics in 1931, as an assistant attorney general in Texas. He first came to public attention in a series of cases he won against the major oil companies, which led to the creation of the Permanent University Fund. His actions prevented University of Texas regents from spending oil royalties immediately, creating instead a trust fund for Texas public schools, which today has more than \$5 billion earmarked for education.

During World War II, Yarborough enlisted in the Army, serving first under Gen. George Patton, then in the Philippines. After the surrender of Japan, he was appointed one of the 11 provincial governors of Japan, serving under Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

A 'New Deal' Democrat

Yarborough ran for governor of Texas in 1952, challenging incumbent Gov. Allan Shivers in the Democratic primary. At the time, the Democratic Party was the only party in Texas. Shivers represented the dominant faction, that of the conservative establishment, centered in the oil and gas interests, banking, and insurance. Yarborough, running as a "New Deal" Democrat, won only 36% of the vote in that race. He lost to Shivers again in 1954, but increased his support to 47%. Ever persistent, he suffered a third defeat for governor in 1956, but lost this time by fewer than 3,200 votes.

Yarborough's persistence paid off, as he won a special election to the U.S. Senate in April 1957.

The new senator from Texas soon demonstrated that he would not tolerate the Jim Crow racism that characterized his southern Democratic colleagues. He not only refused to sign the "Southern Manifesto," a kind of blood oath binding the region's senators to oppose desegregation, but he voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1957. He was the only southern senator to vote for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and one of the few who voted for the Voting Rights Act in 1965. He said he did so because "it was the right thing to do . . . the only thing to do."

His opponent for reelection in 1964, a Republican from Houston named George Bush, made Yarborough's votes for civil rights legislation, and his support for the rights of labor and funding for education, major issues in their race. Despite a dirty campaign run by Bush, Yarborough was reelected. (See Webster Tarpley and Anton Chaitkin, *George Bush: The Unauthorized Biography*, published by EIR. Senator Yarborough, by releasing his papers to EIR, and through his reminiscences, aided the authors in capturing the true flavor of this campaign.)

As a senator, Yarborough sponsored some of the more important bills in the postwar era. He was instrumental in the passage of Medicare and Medicaid. He was the sponsor of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which provided for the first time significant government funding of higher education; the Cold War GI Bill of 1966, which updated the original GI Bill and benefitted 5 million veterans; and the National Cancer Act of 1970.

Throughout his life, Yarborough maintained a zest for discovery. He was always interested in new ideas, especially those which improved the conditions of the "little man." His commitment to justice is summed up in this quote from him which appears on a courthouse in Houston: "Justice is the light of reason replacing force in settling the affairs of mankind; tempered with mercy, it is God's work on earth."