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The Old Order Changeth

In the wee hours of Easter Sunday morning, 1965, the political clock in South Carolina came to a brief stop. The mark in time was the unexpected death of Olin Dewitt Johnston, the durable senior U.S. senator whose career spanned almost fifty years, covering a grim half-century of economic futility and racial alienation in South Carolina. In the aftermath, intensifying social and economic tremors began to rearrange the state's political and racial underpinnings as new leaders emerged.

Viewed in the context of ensuing years, the senator's death and the events subsequent to it would prove to be a defining moment in the state's politics. A political generation whose roots could be traced to the days of deep racial division and hostility of the early twentieth century was giving way to a generation of leaders bred in the Depression, toughened by World War II, and endowed with a healthy skepticism about the political absolutes that had guided the state's past. Set in motion that day would be a chain of developments that would not only change the faces at the top of the state's political ladder, it would also shift attention from the state's ideologically murky past and bring to prominence a practitioner of the state's newly fashioned political moderation.

That practitioner was Robert Evander McNair, a small-town attorney whose quiet demeanor well suited the forces of postwar pragmatism emerging to challenge the powers of political absolutism which had dominated the state for more than half of the twentieth century. During McNair's sixty-eight months as governor, South Carolina would become a battlefield where long-subdued differences over racial, economic, and political realities would flare into open, and often explosive, conflict. South Carolina would also endure along with the rest of the states a decade that saw the nation beset by civil disorder and torn by political divisions threatening the very survival of American democracy. It would be

McNair's fate to preside over the collision of these endemic forces during his term in office and to oversee the painful transformation of the stalwart old Confederate state into a member in good standing of the economically ambitious "New South" of the latter decades of the twentieth century.

Such portentous developments, however, seemed illusively off in the distance in those spring days of 1965 in which the state's political community was caught by surprise at the loss of one of its most prominent members. Olin Johnston commanded a formidable position in South Carolina's public hierarchy, both as an officeholder of some seniority in Washington and as a political figure with few peers in winning elections and sustaining voter support.

At his death, Johnston was remembered as a champion of the downtrodden, a practitioner of the politics of resiliency, and a resolute defender of the racial status quo. He supported programs of public power, public welfare, public housing, and public education and even broke with most southerners in casting a rare Dixie prolabor vote against the Taft-Hartley Act. But when it came to other issues of public interest, namely, those identified with civil rights, Johnston was strictly a traditionalist, joining his other southern colleagues in resisting the civil rights initiatives of every president from Franklin Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson.[1]

As measured against his colleague, Strom Thurmond, Johnston's racial views were considered for his time to be "moderate," but it was a judgment applied only in the latter years of his senatorial career. As governor, in the months preceding his 1944 election to the Senate over arch-segregationist Ellison D. "Cotton Ed" Smith, Johnston affirmed his own racial credentials by masterminding a plan designed to prevent court-ordered black-voter participation in the state's Democratic primary, the political contest that at the time was the dominant election for state and local offices. "White supremacy will be maintained in our primaries," Johnston promised South Carolinians.[2]

As race became an issue of increasing political and public urgency in the postwar years, Johnston's intransigence on civil rights cast him as a something of a throwback to the state's virulently segregationist past, particularly in the eyes of a new generation of political leaders that was beginning to view racial conflict as an unsightly impediment to the state's ambitious economic plans and strategies. It was, in fact, a matter of some symbolic significance that Johnston and his predecessor, "Cotton Ed" Smith, had held the same Senate seat for fifty-seven years (Johnston for twenty-one years and Smith for thirty-six years), a span that included years in which "South Carolina [and Mississippi] put the white supremacy case most bitterly, most uncompromisingly, and most vindictively [and] used the floor of the U.S. Senate as a forum for white supremacy oratory."[3]

In a state where incumbent senators were rarely defeated, particularly after they had two or three terms under their belts, Johnston's death not only opened up the most coveted office in the state's political order, it also loosened the leadership

chain sufficiently to create an opportunity for some new faces and new thinking to come forward. South Carolina, in fact, was already making something of a break with its long entrenched political past, having accomplished the peaceful court-ordered desegregation of its two major institutions of higher education—Clemson College (later University) and the University of South Carolina in 1963—and having averted, at least for the moment, major racial violence in its accommodation of civil-rights-oriented public demonstrations earlier in the decade.

Moderate Stirrings for Change

Emerging as ringleaders of the state's newly found moderation were South Carolinians who could scarcely be regarded as rebellious or iconoclastic. For the most part, they were homegrown, conservative-minded, occasionally progressive-thinking public figures who were rarely—if ever—seen in heroic charges against the political barricades of the times. They were most comfortable as infighters battling within the existing rules and structures of the state's political and governmental establishment. Their fights, however, were clearly directed toward issues that had lain dormant for generations, issues such as public education, economic diversification, and racial equity. They recognized in their own carefully modulated tones and strategies that the state's overall condition was desperate and that a lot of things had to change before it got much better.

If anything, the emergent leaders were probably more economy builders than social crusaders. They advocated aggressive industrial recruitment as a means of gaining economic diversity, and they recognized that good public schools were an essential ingredient of economic strength and stability. It was a strategy that had its detractors, particularly among traditional business and industries, heavily dependent on a low-wage workforce. Also contentious to some was the suggestion that a new economic strategy required a new political enlightenment, at least to the extent of recognizing that racial peace should be embraced as much for its usefulness in an overall economic development package as for any compelling human or societal value.

The ranks of the reformers were not limited to politicians, particularly when it came to maintaining racial peace. There were corporate leaders who believed civil disruption was bad for business. There were ruling members of the state's political oligarchy, who saw disorder as a threat to their control. There were middle-class black leaders holding fast to the gradual process of court relief as the best strategy to address their grievances. There were some notable church leaders of both races seeking to use their congregations as bridges for peaceful resolution of differences. There were even some political progressives—many of whom shared World War II experience—who staked their careers on the perception that the state was willing to accept the inevitability of significant change to its long-defended way of life.

Among the political progressives in those pivotal spring days of 1965 were two sometimes bitter rivals—Ernest F. Hollings, an up-and-coming young former governor who had helped engineer the peaceful Clemson desegregation, and the sitting governor, Donald Russell, a former president of the University of South Carolina whom Hollings had beaten soundly in the 1958 Democratic primary for governor. For all their political rivalry, they shared a common interest in racial peace for South Carolina, and it was during the latter days of Hollings's gubernatorial administration and the early days of Russell's term as governor in 1963 that the two competitors forged at least a temporary truce to carry out the peaceful desegregation of Clemson College.

A little over two years later—on that Easter morning in 1965 as South Carolina bade farewell to its senior senator, Olin Johnston—another important decision awaited Donald Russell. As governor of the state, he was empowered to appoint the interim successor to the suddenly vacant seat in the U.S. Senate. It was a decision charged with immediate political consequences and severe political hazards. It was also a decision that could say a lot about the state's long-term racial future.

To some, Russell seemed a political neophyte. Much of his political experience had been gained as a protege and assistant to James F. Byrnes during the latter's service as director of the nation's war-mobilization efforts in World War II, and Russell's election as governor in 1962—on his second try—represented the first, and only, elective political office he ever held.

Nonetheless, Russell took his place prominently in the politics of the 1960s as a racial moderate and a progressive, business-minded governmental leader. A wealthy attorney with southern courtliness and keen intellect, Russell had been a popular dollar-a-year president of the University of South Carolina (1952–1957) who invested personal moneys in renovations and scholarship funds at that institution. By the time of his death in 1998, the value of Russell's endowments at the university had reached $2.4 million.[4] He had also stirred segregationists' ire when he invited black South Carolinians to his lawn party at the governor's mansion following his inaugural in January 1963.

At age fifty-nine, Russell had the look of a CEO, tall and erect with a polished bearing that belied his impoverished childhood and the toughening early years of his practice as a small-town lawyer in Union, South Carolina. Russell's public career was launched when he joined the prestigious Spartanburg firm of which Byrnes was a partner, and his political niche was established in Washington, where he served under Byrnes in several key wartime and postwar positions, including as Byrnes's deputy secretary of state in 1945 under President Truman.[5]

He was also one of few men in the state's recent history who became governor without first serving an apprenticeship in the General Assembly, and for some—despite his experience in high-level federal posts—that made him something of a political outsider in his own home state. Russell was described by one State

House newsman as "an intellectual, aloof, something of a 'loner,' painfully shy and comfortable only in the company of friendly peers."[6]

Solomon Blatt, the state's legendary Speaker of the House who had tutored many a governor-to-be in the fine art of political infighting, said of Russell that "Donald was a very honorable fellow. He was clean and had one of the finest legal minds of any lawyer that ever lived in this state. And, he made a good governor. He was honest. But Donald wasn't a good mixer."[7]

There was, in fact, the feeling that Russell's real ambition was to return to Washington to rejoin the environment he had enjoyed under Byrnes. One insightful Democrat, Attorney General Daniel R. McLeod, recalled, "I don't think Governor Russell liked being Governor . . . in my opinion, he couldn't be divorced from the University. I believe Governor Russell . . . wanted to go to Washington."[8]

In those pivotal spring days of 1965, speculation grew that Russell might opt to set in motion the forces required to have himself designated to succeed Johnston on an interim basis. It seemed politically logical for a man longing for the trappings of Washington; it was also politically dangerous for a man who had won public office only once. The passing of political icons such as Johnston—particularly on something of an unexpected basis—was often accompanied by strong public emotion and even something of an extended political wake and mourning designed to accord the deceased a period of tribute and reverence uncluttered by dispute or contention. Johnston had been a South Carolina political institution for more than four decades, and his political strength came largely through his personal appeal to the thousands of textile workers who made up the core of South Carolina's industrial labor force.

The product of a tenant farm and a child laborer in textile mills himself, Johnston was described as a "skilled campaigner [who] was at his best at the crossroads, the county courthouses, and the textile mills. . . . He would appear with dust on his shoes and a suit showing signs of hard travel. Most of those who turned out to greet him would be called by name. . . . Textile workers loved him. When campaigning through a mill, the tall senator would stop at a disabled loom, quickly tie an expert weave knot in the right place, and set the machine to humming again."[9]

Conventional political wisdom would have argued for Russell to make a symbolic or sentimental choice to replace the popular Johnston and to honor the tradition of undisturbed political repose for the deceased legend. Nine years earlier, on September 6, 1954, on the occasion of the sudden death of the state's senior senator, Burnet R. Maybank, Governor Byrnes had appointed popular industrialist Charles E. Daniel to serve the remaining few months of Maybank's term before giving way to Strom Thurmond, who won in the remarkable write-in campaign over state senator Edgar Brown in November 1954.[10]

Russell thus had several options in choosing a successor to Johnston, and within two days of the senator's death, newspapers were speculating about those options and suggesting a number of candidates, ranging from the sentimental to the substantive. Among them were two members of the Johnston family—wife Gladys, a popular campaigner on the trail with her husband, and brother Bill, the affable mayor of Anderson. The family had become politically significant in its own right, and one of Olin and Gladys Johnston's three children, Elizabeth J., would later serve three terms in the United States Congress from the Fourth District, known after her marriage to Dwight F. Patterson Jr. of Laurens as Liz Patterson. Other candidates mentioned in the speculation were the seventy-six-year-old Edgar Brown, who had lost in three previous Senate bids, former Governor Byrnes, and Columbia mayor Lester Bates, who had twice been a candidate in the Democratic primary for governor, losing to Byrnes in 1950 and to George Bell Timmerman Jr. in 1954.

By April 20, 1965, two days after Olin Johnston's death, public conjecture also began to appear that Russell would claim the seat for himself. One newspaper analyst noted that Russell could gain the advantage of "some 20 months of seniority and more than a year of experience to offer the 1966 voters." By law, the interim appointment would be in effect only until the state's next general election, November 8, 1966. The analyst also warned, "such a course might prove so unpopular with the public that Russell would be committing political suicide to follow it."[11]

Russell Opts for the Senate

Political suicide or not, Russell's decision was known publicly a day later. He would claim the U.S. Senate seat for himself. Columbia newsman Charles H. Wickenberg Jr., a governmental insider who had served as executive secretary to Governor Timmerman (1955–1959) and was executive news editor of *The State* newspaper, broke the story in that newspaper's April 21 edition, citing "unimpeachable sources" that revealed, "The decision to go to the U.S. Senate was urged on the . . . governor by individual legislative, business, industrial and labor leaders." Wickenberg's account quoted a source as saying, "We need a strong Democrat in Washington now, right now, to replace Johnston. There are vital issues concerning our state such as the one-price cotton matter that involves the textile industry. We cannot wait for a senator; Russell holds the most recent mandate of South Carolina voters to state office. In November 1966, he will have to answer to them for his record in the U.S. Senate."[12]

The news account proved accurate and prophetic. Wickenberg had, in fact, been in close touch with Russell's press secretary, Fred R. Sheheen, who was a former colleague when both were South Carolina bureau chiefs for the *Charlotte Observer.* Sheheen later recalled that prior to publishing the story, Wickenberg had called to confirm its contents and had read a draft of the story to him. "I

thought the story was extremely favorable to Governor Russell because it did recount these factors about the textile people demanding that they needed someone strong [in Washington] to protect the textile interests." Sheheen passed the word back to Russell about the story, and, after a conversation about its contents, he called Wickenberg and said, "I can't confirm or deny the story, but if I were Governmental Affairs Editor of *The State* newspaper, I'd run it."[13]

Later that day, the word was hurriedly spread that Russell would indeed step down as governor, touching off events that would result in his becoming U.S. senator the next day—April 22, 1965—and elevating to the office of governor a young attorney by the name of Robert Evander McNair, victorious two years earlier in his first statewide race for lieutenant governor after five two-year terms in the South Carolina House of Representatives.

McNair recalled that Russell had actually tipped his hand as early as Sunday afternoon—hours after Johnston's death—about his plans:

> Mr. Russell called [on Sunday] and said, "I think we ought to sit down and talk. Could you and Josephine [Mrs. McNair] drive up to Columbia?"
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> We did. We made arrangements, mutually agreed, that we should not come in our car. So we borrowed an automobile and drove to Columbia.
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> I had a good, lengthy discussion with Governor Russell that Sunday afternoon. We agreed that any discussion about Senator Johnston's replacement should be very confidential. . . . Governor Russell was not in any way going to indicate what he was going to do. He simply wanted to talk about it.[14]

The conversation, according to McNair, went along the lines that "he wanted to know how I felt about it, and I recall saying, . . . 'Mr. Russell, this is a decision that you have to make' . . . I think I did say that I thought his decision, if he chose to go, would be well-received, that people were accustomed to having strong people [in Washington], that he had a good background, that . . . most of his career had been spent in Washington, and he certainly could render this state a great service."[15]

Speaker Blatt later recalled his views on the transition:

> Bob McNair came by Barnwell with his wife and picked me up and took me to Columbia with them. [McNair recalled that the Blatts and McNairs traveled to Columbia together for the swearing-in ceremony on April 22. Representative William Rhodes and his wife, Elizabeth, were also in the party.] They talked with me about it and what the effect of it would be, and I told them, of course, the danger of it. But I said I just want to tell you one thing, "Donald wants to be a U.S. senator and Bob wants to be governor. This is the only way I know of that it's going to happen, both of you getting what you want. Now I don't know what payday is coming—what's going to happen—I don't know.

> But there's going to be a lot of people mad about it. And your friends—most of them—that are really your friends are going to be happy because you have accomplished what you've wanted for yourself."[16]

McNair Becomes the "Surprise" Governor

It all happened quickly. At precisely noon on Thursday, April 22, 1965, Donald Russell resigned as governor and McNair was sworn in by state supreme court justice Claude A. Taylor in a House of Representatives chamber crowded by senators, house members, and guests. An hour later, McNair signed the interim appointment naming his predecessor, Russell, to fill the vacancy left by the death of Olin Johnston four days earlier.

As predicted, Russell's decision set off mixed reaction among South Carolinians. The late senator's family was reported as being "miffed" at being excluded from the decision, and Johnston's widow, Gladys, was quoted as saying, "No member of the Johnston family was consulted on my husband's successor."[17] Would-be aspirant, brother William Johnston, "acknowledged that many friends suggested" that he fill his brother's post, but he said, "I did not discuss the matter with anybody. I didn't know what the Governor [Russell] had decided until I heard it on the radio in my office Wednesday [April 21] morning."[18]

Charlotte Observer columnist Jack Claiborne reflected the following Sunday that Russell's move was a "dangerous one." "Not only did it make the Johnstons unhappy," he wrote, "it also set up Russell as a target for Hollings."[19] Hollings, who had defeated Russell in the 1958 governor's race, followed the counsel of his political advisers, who encouraged him to stay adamantly noncommittal about the self-appointment decision. Hollings praised Russell's political courage and strong beliefs but was nonetheless measuring his chances against Russell in the upcoming special election for the full Senate term nineteen months hence. He remarked pointedly, "I am certain the people of South Carolina will express their own opinions of Russell's 'self-appointment' in the Democratic primary next year."[20]

Lost, at least for the moment, in all the speculation about palace intrigue, political hurt feelings, and personal career opportunities were some larger questions about South Carolina and its immediate political and racial strategies in the post-Johnston era. The peaceful desegregation at the University of South Carolina and Clemson had gained some positive national attention for the state and for individuals like Brown, Hollings, textile industry lobbyist John Cauthen, Clemson president Robert C. Edwards, and others. But elsewhere the political rifts were widening as two-party politics and the deepening sentiments over the state's racial future became increasingly prominent. The state's political community was crowded with powerful figures of highly divergent stances, including Thurmond and his GOP allies, who scorned what they considered capitulation to court orders and who actively promoted the belief that there was still a chance for racial segregation to be retained.

Much of that lurking contention was obscured by traditions of civility and surface perceptions of political stability as the state welcomed and assessed its new governor. Bob McNair's arrival as the state's chief executive—unexpected as it was in the public life of the state—was no political fluke. It simply came a little ahead of time for a man who had set his eyes on the governor's office some years earlier and had spent much of his career preparing himself for the job.

McNair's rise through the ranks, in fact, was a rapid one. During his first term in the House, in 1951–1952, he had toed the line by supporting the 3 percent sales tax in a strategy championed by Governor Byrnes to upgrade the state's all-black schools and thereby salvage its "separate but equal" segregated school system.[21] As a protégé of Speaker Blatt, McNair was subsequently fast-tracked through leadership positions in the House, chairing two key standing committees—Labor, Commerce, and Industry and then Judiciary—before he was forty years old. He was thus able to sponsor, among other key measures, right-to-work legislation, which helped earn him popularity among the state's industrial and corporate leaders. He had been the leading candidate to replace Blatt as Speaker in 1958, but when Blatt abandoned plans to run for a position on the state supreme court, McNair turned his attention to a run for lieutenant governor in 1962.

In that race, he defeated popular upcountry senator Marshall Parker of Oconee County, establishing along the way his credibility as a statewide political figure and defying at least two of the state's unwritten election rules: House members are not supposed to beat senators; and candidates from little places like Allendale were not supposed to put together effective statewide organizations.

There was another distinctive aspect of McNair's victory in 1962. He gained a substantial portion of the still relatively small black vote in the state, a vote that would expand to become his margin of victory in the 1966 governor's race. At a time when direct linkages between black and white public figures were considered politically risky, McNair had the support of an aggressive young NAACP lawyer named Matthew Perry, who had already gained some attention as Harvey Gantt's attorney in the desegregation of Clemson and who would later become the state's first black federal judge.

A Popular Insider

Along the way, McNair had also begun to attract the attention from many quarters—lobbyists, state employees, municipal officials, lawyers, corporate directors, ministers, community leaders, and others who made it their business to keep up with the inner workings of the state's governmental and political machinery.

The brief ceremony swearing in McNair as governor drew a description from Robert McHugh, the veteran governmental affairs editor of *The State* newspaper who had succeeded Wickenberg in that post: "The reservoir of affection McNair's

former legislative colleagues have for him could be measured in the spontaneity of the standing ovation they gave him."[22]

Other accounts of the McNair inaugural were similarly upbeat. Charleston's Hugh Gibson, whose reservations about Russell's political skills had been expressed only days earlier, scarcely concealed his enthusiasm for McNair in his front-page coverage in the *News and Courier* on April 22. "The 41-year-old Allendale attorney unquestionably is one of the most popular figures ever to come to that office," he wrote, predicting that "South Carolina's 77th governor [will] usher in an 'era of good feeling' in both state governmental and legislative circles."[23]

Gibson, a pipe-smoking Marine veteran who was particularly known for his coverage of the state senate and who was treated by some of its members as if he were one of them, had seen McNair in action as the lieutenant governor presiding over the state's upper chamber. Gibson could be curmudgeonly on occasion, but with McNair he was uncharacteristically warm:

> Veteran legislators cannot recall a chief executive more genuinely loved in both houses of the General Assembly. . . . This popularity is by no means accidental. It stems, in part, from his own friendly and easy disposition; in part, from his 12 years in the House; in part, from his firm but friendly service as the Senate's presiding officer.
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> And, most of all, it stems from the fact that for some eight years McNair has been working at the business of winning friends and votes to reach the prize which fell into his hands yesterday.[24]

The usually taciturn Associated Press, whose bureau chief was another senate denizen, a colorful red-haired Georgian named Al Lanier, let down its hair long enough to describe McNair as a "square-built, cherubic-looking Allendale attorney [who] is a vote-getter without being a back-slapper. . . . He set his sights on the governorship years ago but has never let tireless campaign work interfere with a heavy legislative load that doesn't reach the public eye."[25]

> McNair's office on the Senate side of the State House is a hangout for visitors and legislative hangers-on who are drawn there by McNair's tolerant attitude toward all who want to see him. A newsman, chatting idly in McNair's office just last week, posed this question: "Bob, Governor Russell has used the education angle and former Governor Fritz Hollings made his pitch on industrial advances. What pitch are you going to use if you become governor?"
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> "I'm going to finish what they started," McNair shot back.[26]

The quick retort found its way into McNair's brief formal remarks following his swearing-in as governor. "I pledge myself to carry out to the best of my ability those programs which have been inaugurated by my predecessors and to be alert as God

gives me vision to any and all possibilities of improving the welfare of our citizens," he said.[27]

McNair's short speech was filled more with signals than it was with recommendations for action. "There was nothing specific," he said. "I did not spell out any program or anything. It was just tone-setting for the approach we wanted to take."[28] It was also a speech tailored for legislative ears, reminding them that he still considered himself, after all, one of them. "I wanted to set the tone that this was going to be a 'we' administration and . . . I was really looking for cooperation from the General Assembly and all people in government to work together to move the state forward."[29]

Blatt, Brown and the Legislative Alliances

McNair got quick reciprocation from the General Assembly on his invitation to be part of a "we" administration. Within six days of his swearing-in, the usually feuding budget chiefs of the state senate and House of Representatives declared a truce and, in a virtually unprecedented act of harmony, presented the new governor with something of an inaugural gift, a state appropriation bill passed by both houses without the necessity of a conference committee to negotiate the differences between the two bodies' versions of the bill. "I took that as being a gesture of good will on their part," McNair said, "and I think that it started us off on a feeling of cooperation."[30]

The feeling of cooperation was, as McNair well knew, more than a political nicety or a gesture of goodwill. For a young, newly inaugurated chief executive, it meant access to a valuable source of power for South Carolina governors weakly endowed by the state constitution at the time—power granted voluntarily by legislative leaders who dominated much of the state's governmental process. Born in one of the state's original counties, rural Berkeley County, and elected from tiny Allendale, the state's newest county at the time, McNair had the advantage of growing up politically in small-county politics, and he had regularly made common cause with the small-county barons as allies and fellow travelers during his legislative career.

As a member of the House leadership and later as lieutenant governor presiding over the senate each day, McNair could also bridge the chasm separating the oft-feuding senate and House leaders in the state's General Assembly. Unlike his two urban predecessors as governor—Hollings of Charleston and Russell of Spartanburg—McNair was a member in good standing of the ephemeral "Barnwell Ring," a loose confederation of small-county legislators who in recent years had drawn their allegiance more from the rural nature of their causes than from their geographic proximity to Barnwell County.

In the days before one-man, one-vote rulings tied representation to population in the South Carolina legislature, counties were the election units for both