The 1938 Democratic Senatorial Primary in South Carolina epitomized the best and the worst of South Carolina politics in the first half of the twentieth century. In this heated contest between the five-term incumbent, an incumbent governor, and the leading State Senator, personalities, and not issues, became the focal points of the campaign. For instance, race was not really an issue because blacks could not vote in the Democratic Primary at that time. Although all three candidates subscribed to the doctrine of “White Supremacy”, Senator Smith invoked the doctrine on numerous occasions as an effective oratorical tool to liven up his audiences. During two and a half months of continuous stump speeches during the hot summer of 1938, the three candidates attacked each other so much that even jaded South Carolina newspaper editors lamented the “mud-slinging” campaign. The primary took on national overtones because the two challengers sought the blessings of President Roosevelt so fervently that the incumbent Senator labeled them “coattail swingers”. The race may have been decided in favor of the incumbent due to a brief remark by the President to a crowd of many thousands on a hot and humid night at the Greenville train station.

Five men entered South Carolina’s 1938 Senatorial race. The first to make his formal entry was Theo H. Vaughn, who had recently resigned from organizational work at Clemson College. Vaughn stated on February 9, 1938, upon announcing his candidacy that he would run on a platform of “human relations”. The next candidate was Ashton H. Williams, a forty-six year old Florence attorney. Williams had been a figure in state politics since 1932 when he made an unsuccessful race against Senator Smith in a field which included former Governor Coleman L. Blease and Leon Harris of Anderson. Both Vaughn and Williams dropped out by late May.

The third candidate was Edgar A. Brown of Barnwell, who announced on May 8th. Senator Brown had run against Smith in 1926 and been defeated. After being Speaker of the House, he was elected a state senator in 1928. Brown said “I announce myself as a New Deal candidate for the United States Senate subject to the rules of the Democratic Party and on a progressive platform. This is going to be a state campaign on national issues.” He repeatedly made statements to the effect that he was “in this thing to win,” although he dropped out of the race at the last minute.
Senator Ellison Durant Smith, South Carolina’s senior Senator, announced on May 10, 1938, that “I hereby announce that I am a candidate for re-election to the office of United States Senator, subject to the rules and regulations of the Democratic Party.” Senator Smith was born in 1864 to the Reverend William H. and Isabella McLeod Smith in Lynchburg, South Carolina. After attending Stewart’s School in Charleston, he finished his freshman year at the University of South Carolina and then went on to enroll at Wofford College in Spartanburg from which he graduated with honors in 1889. His first marriage was to Miss Mattie Moorer of St. George, South Carolina, and his second to Anna Brunson Farley of Laurens County. Because of his support of the cotton movement, he became known as “Cotton Ed” Smith and took a seat as United States Senator for the first time on March 4, 1909.

The final candidate in the 1938 primary was Governor Olin D. Johnston, another Wofford graduate, who stated that “[m]y campaign for the Senate will be based on a record of continued unshakeable loyalty to the Democratic platform and the head of our party, President Roosevelt. I believe in the principles and ideals of government as laid down by the President. I have supported them in the past and will continue my support of them in the future.” When he paid his $1,000.00 entrance fee to the state’s Democratic Headquarters, he stated: “As I enter the contest for the Senate, it is no secret that I have been assured of the continued friendly cooperation of the President of the United States – cooperation for the best interests of South Carolina.”

Even before the primary campaign had begun, one astute observer of the political scene had predicted the outcome. Ben Robertson, a nationally prominent journalist from Pickens County, covered the campaign for the Anderson newspaper. Robertson felt that Brown did not have much of a chance because he had never won a statewide race. On the other hand, he thought Olin Johnston was a serious challenger and accurately predicted that a presidential visit would probably backfire on Johnston and elect Smith. “This is the original state’s rights state and they keenly resent any outside interference.” Robertson anticipated that Smith would pull the farm vote and Johnston would draw his support from “cotton mill labor”; he added that the 1938 primary marked the first time “this division has ever been pronounced” in South Carolina politics. Robertson felt that Smith’s age and seniority worked in his favor. “Tradition and prestige are respected here. Smith is old and this state respects old age – they feel sorry for him, growing old, it would be a shame to turn out an old man after all these years.”

The 1938 senatorial primary involved the usual obligation of speaking in all forty-six South Carolina counties by the candidates, which was known as the “stump meetings.” Senator Smith referred to these stump meetings as the “monkey circus.” The first stump meeting occurred at
Sumter on June 14. Brown and Johnston immediately directed a heavy barrage at “Cotton Ed”, the theme of which was that his agricultural crusade had become a study in futility. Not only was “Old Sleepy” completely out of date, his selfish and petulant opposition to the President was depriving South Carolina of New Deal benefits. Although both candidates vied with each other in praising the President, Johnston was more successful in grasping his coattails.

At age seventy-four, Senator Smith responded to this challenge with the greatest performance of his career. With devastating wit, he disposed of “these two things running against me.” Turning first to “Bacon Brown” who had promised to bring home the federal bacon, Smith replied, “Yes, and he will put it in his own smokehouse.” Governor Johnston was referred to as a “coattail swinger” to the extent that if the President ever kicked back he would be crippled for life. “When God made Olin, he forgot to give him a brain,” said Smith.

Senator Smith’s platform consisted of the usual litany of states’ rights, a tariff for revenue only, and white supremacy, but the oratorical mainstay of his campaign was the “Philadelphia Story.” At some time during the course of his speeches, Smith would begin with a flowery account of the development of liberty on the fields of Runnymede, carry on to the Declaration of Independence, and get the boys in gray half way up the slope at Gettysburg, and some old farmer would shout, “Hell, Ed, tell us about Phillydelphy!” Smith would then launch into his story about how he walked out of the Philadelphia Democratic National Convention in 1936 when a black preacher was called upon to give the invocation. Smith would state that “he started talking and I started walking, and as I walked it seemed to me that old John Calhoun leaned down from his mansion in the sky and whispered – you did right, Ed.”

Senator Smith saw no contradiction between his actions at Philadelphia and his personal relationships with blacks. During the 1938 campaign, he stated: “Nobody feels more kindly toward the Negro than I do. I was cradled by a black mammie whom I loved almost as deeply as my own. I was raised largely by an old Negro man. But my love for them does not countenance political and social equality, and I will never stand for it.” Senator Smith also went on to attack Brown and Johnston by stating: “Are you one hundred percent for the anti-lynch bill and for social equality for Negroes and whites in South Carolina? If you are not, then you are no more one hundred percenters than I am. You boys will have to ride your own horses. You can’t ride yours and mine.”

After being attacked by Smith as a “coattail swinger”, Senator Brown stated: “I’m not coming here as a coattail swinger, a hundred percent. I come here offering my services as a Senator in the United States Senate and asking you to elect me on a record of public achievement. If my only qualification is that I’m a friend of the President, then I’m unfit to represent you in the Senate.” At this stage of the game, Brown was referring to Senator Smith as “bluff” and to Senator Johnston as “blunder”.

Governor Johnston was not at a loss for words either. For instance, he called Senator Smith “a sleeping Senator.” He also went on to state that “we have two Senators. They remind me of a team of mules. One of them, Byrnes, goes forward with the Administration. The other one,

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1 A transcript of the climactic stump meeting of the 1938 campaign is attached to this article. In that speech, Senator Smith went into great detail about his actions at the 1936 Philadelphia convention.
Smith, hangs back on the singletree.” Senator Smith retorted by stating: “Johnston imitates my voice. What wouldn’t he give to imitate my brain!”

The stump meetings of 1938 were the epitome of such debates. A South Carolina paper stated that “Smith appears more vigorous on the stump than he did in his campaign six years ago; Johnston is in fine form, the picture of health, with the vim and vigor of a splendid physique; Brown, likewise, a splendid campaigner, at ease in public speaking, forcible in delivery, and with an easy flow of words, is showing no fatigue from this constant slashing out at both opponents.”

The stump meeting at Winnsboro, on August 2, 1938, was perhaps one of the most entertaining of the long summer campaign. The meeting started at the county courthouse and then was moved to the Mt. Zion Institute Auditorium due to the large crowd. Governor Johnston went first and talked about issues in the cold and factual tones of a prosecutor and did not even allude to Brown until near the end of his speech when he said: “I did not mention my other opponent because there is no use shooting at dead birds.” He wrapped up by making reference to Senator Smith’s alleged “fifty-cents-a-day” statement on the floor of the Senate. He also mentioned for the benefit of the women present that Smith had voted against female suffrage.

Brown’s remarks were not recorded so it is assumed that he made his usual harangue about Governor Johnston and the Highway Department and Senator Smith’s failure to accomplish anything for the farmers of South Carolina. When it came his turn, Smith was at the height of his form. He opened his speech by declaring that it was a “good omen for the country when the women take an interest in national politics.” He wondered “what more power the women wanted – they had all the power in the whole shootin’ match anyway.” As to the fifty-cents-a-day remark, “I was trying to save the manufacturing interests of my section from the effects of the yankee protective tariffs. I believe labor is entitled to a just share of the profits made from their work!” He exhorted the standing-room only crowd to re-elect him because “outside forces are seeking to defeat me because of my stand for White Supremacy.”

One of the few issues of the 1938 primary campaign was the accusation that Senator Smith had stated that a man in South Carolina could live on 50¢ a day. This came to a head when President Roosevelt passed through Greenville, South Carolina, in the late evening of August 11, 1938. Roosevelt was seeking to “purge” those Senators who had opposed his 1937 Supreme Court-packing plan. After speaking against the re-election of Senator Walter George of Georgia (who was re-elected) in Barnesville, Georgia, President Roosevelt arrived in his air-conditioned train in Greenville about 10:30 in the evening to a crowd estimated at 15,000 to 25,000. Senator James F. Byrnes of South Carolina, a close friend of the President,
was concerned that Roosevelt might speak out against Senator Smith which could cause problems for the future political career of Burnet Maybank of Charleston. When Byrnes asked Roosevelt what he intended to say in a few moments to the crowd outside, Roosevelt was rather nonchalant: “I’ll tell them about fishing.” Unfortunately, at the conclusion of his brief remarks, Roosevelt stated that: “The other thing is, I don’t believe any family or any man in South Carolina can live on fifty cents a day.” Marvin McIntyre, a presidential assistant who was a friend of Byrnes, on hearing Roosevelt’s remark, immediately jumped back onto the train and pulled a bell cord, signaling the engineer to begin moving the train out of the station. Before Roosevelt could elaborate on his rather vague remark about Senator Smith, the extension cord of the President’s microphone in the rear car of the train was broken and the train quickly vanished into the humid South Carolina night.

One interesting aspect of the 1938 primary campaign was the fact that most of the newspapers in South Carolina supported Senator Smith, mainly because their editors were against many aspects of the New Deal. The charge was led by William Watts Ball, the cantankerous editor of the Charleston News and Courier, who devoted practically all of his editorial columns to attacking Roosevelt and his New Deal policies. During the campaign, Ball had warned against “a sneaking attack on the integrity of the white party and its primary.” Ball also fanned the resentment of South Carolinians against the federal government interfering in its politics in a front page editorial the day before the primary: “Who shall do the thinking for South Carolina? Shall the gentleman [President Roosevelt] who votes in Hyde Park, New York? Or shall you, the voters of South Carolina, in tomorrow’s primary?”

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2 Senator Byrnes was also very concerned that Roosevelt’s intervention in the Southern primaries would drive the South’s conservative state parties into forming an independent, regional party. The President was attempting to liberalize the Democratic Party, particularly on the issue of race, and such an attempt could fragment the Democratic Party as had happened at Charleston in 1860. Either fragmentation of the Democratic Party or the creation of a new independent southern party could deprive Senator Byrnes of his influence and seniority. Ironically, it was the Truman Administration that led to the creation of the “Dixiecrat” Party in 1948, whose presidential nominee was J. Strom Thurmond. Byrnes’ resentment at his treatment by Trumam led him to lead the “Democrats for Eisenhower” in the 1952 election.

3 President Roosevelt’s barb dismayed both the Brown and Johnston campaigns. By making this castaway remark, the President showed that he endorsed Johnston, thus hurting Brown and helping Smith. Smith’s campaign acted quickly and released a statement that showed that his remarks were taken out of context and were used hypothetically.

4 Senator Smith was so appreciative of Ball’s editorial efforts on his behalf that he wrote him: “It is difficult for me to put into words my deep appreciation of your sincere enthusiasm on my behalf during my race for re-election to the Senate. Just let me say, I thank you.” Smith would have been rather chagrined to know that Ball had ulterior motives in coming out for Smith. Ball wrote his sister after the election: “As for old
The last debate of the 1938 campaign took place at Township Auditorium in Columbia on August 26, 1938. Senator Brown started out by asserting that Smith did not really walk out of the Philadelphia Convention in 1936 and, in any event, the race question was settled in 1876 by the overthrow of the Reconstruction regime. He went on to state that “We are all anti-Negro in the Black Belt. The people in the South keep the Negroes where they ought to be. It does not matter to us what they do up North. I wouldn’t make a political issue out of walking out while a Negro was praying.” As usual, Brown referred to Governor Johnston as “Machine-Gun” Olin when speaking out against Johnston’s actions in taking over the Highway Department by the National Guard. Brown also charged Governor Johnston with requiring female employees of the State Industrial Commission to work long hours at night on his campaign without compensation.

Governor Johnston was the second speaker of the evening following Senator Brown. He stated: “I have a message, a burning message, for the people. I was greatly amused at ‘Highway’ Edgar and I don’t blame him for calling me ‘Machine-Gun’ Olin. I called out the National Guard and I threw out Ben Sawyer and the Highway Commission, including Edgar Brown’s brother-in-law. If I was Edgar I’d be careful in mentioning machine guns. I was in the World War, but where was Edgar?”

Senator Smith responded with his refutation of the seven “lies” propounded against him by his opponents, including the allegation that he was a delegate at the Haskell Convention in 1890. Senator Smith also related in great detail the “Philadelphia Story” which drew forth a number of rebel yells from his audience. All three candidates received floral tributes from their friends and admirers.

A bombshell was dropped by Senator Brown the next day when he withdrew from the primary race for Senator stating: “My life ambition is, and has been, to round out my public career as a United States Senator. In my efforts to obtain this high purpose I have had, and I have, the loyal and unstinted friendship and support of thousands of South Carolinians. Notwithstanding my burning ambition to go to Washington, yet facing the issue squarely, I have reached the conclusion, a most unhappy one, that I am the third man in the race. If I could get into the second race with either of our opponents, I honestly believe that I would receive a majority of the votes in the state, but I am resigned to the unfortunate position of the third man. I therefore withdraw from the race for the United States Senate, so that this contest may be concluded with the primary next Tuesday.”

The final election results were: Senator Smith – 186,519 and Olin Johnston 150,437. Ben Robertson’s pre-campaign prediction that Smith would reap the farm vote was proven to be correct because Smith led in all of the lower and eastern counties of the state. Although Johnston did prevail in the textile Piedmont area, he did not take many of his favorite counties in that area, including his home county of Spartanburg, as well as Laurens, Greenwood and Abbeville.

Smith, monstrous windbag, he has been invaluable – we have used him for the undoing of Blease, and now of Roosevelt who is an edition de luxe of Blease.”
Governor Johnston stated after the election: “I expect to continue in politics in my state and I shall make a real fight. I will not give any quarter or ask any. When I start, my enemies will know they have a fight on hand and I expect to see them defeated.”

President Roosevelt made a national radio address a week before the election during which he asked South Carolinians to forsake Senator Smith and vote instead for a candidate such as Johnston who “thinks in terms of 1938, 1948, and 1958.” As pointed out by Editor Ball on the eve of the primary election, South Carolina voters did not pay much attention to “the gentleman from Hyde Park.” On election night in 1938, Cotton Ed Smith put on a red shirt reminiscent of Wade Hampton’s 1876 campaign and made a speech during a torchlight rally at the foot of Wade Hampton’s statue on the Capitol grounds. Senator Smith stated that “[w]e conquered in ’76 and we conquered in ’38. We fought with bullets then, but today, thank God, we fought with ballots.” A convention of the United Confederate Veterans (a very small number) was going on at the time and they all joined Senator Smith on the Capitol grounds. Smith concluded his remarks by stating: “Lord God of hosts, be with us yet. Lest we forget, lest we forget.” Senator Smith got so carried away that he exclaimed: “I may be a heathen but by gad, I’m still a fightin’ man.” When President Roosevelt was informed of Cotton Ed’s re-election, he only stated: “It takes a long time to bring the past up to the present.”

One unforeseeable result of the 1938 primary may have been the advent of Senator Strom Thurmond. As stated by Olin Johnston’s biographer: “In the Brown-Thurmond senatorial battle for Burnet Maybank’s vacancy in 1954, Brown was to pay dearly for his dramatic withdrawal from the 1938 race. The people remembered, and many were voting more against Brown than for Thurmond.”

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**SOURCES**


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