



WALTER FRANKLIN GEORGE served on the Court of Appeals of Georgia from January 1, 1917, to October 1, 1917, and thereafter until 1922 on the Supreme Court of Georgia. He was born January 29, 1878, on a farm near Preston, Webster County, Georgia, and died on August 4, 1957.

He attended schools in Webster County and later in then Dooly, now Crisp, County at Arabi and Cordele; received B.S. degree in 1900 from Mercer University and his B.L. degree there in 1901; gained high scholastic honors and was an outstanding young orator at Mercer. His alma mater in 1920 conferred upon him an honorary LL.D. degree and posthumously the degree of L.H.D.; admitted to practice in 1901 and began his legal career in Vienna.

He married Lucy Heard of Dooly County in 1903. They had two children, Heard Franklin and Joseph Marcus, who died in WWII. For additional information as to his family history, life, and career, see the memorial dated October 15, 1958, in 214 Georgia Reports, pages 880-895. He was Solicitor-General of Cordele Judicial Circuit 1907-1912; served 1912-1916 as Judge of this same circuit; returned to Vienna and Dooly County to practice law; elected United States Senator in 1922, succeeding U. S. Senator Thomas E. Watson.

He received honorary degrees from Emory, Brown, Columbia, Union, and Georgetown Universities. He was a trustee of Mercer University, which created the Walter F. George School of Law. He was noted as a vocational education leader; he was a Baptist.

President Roosevelt attempted to purge him when he voted against the President's attempt to stack the U. S. Supreme Court, and his famous reply was, "Mr. President, I want you to know I accept your challenge."

He served in the U. S. Senate for 34 years until January 5, 1957, when he was appointed to serve as special representative of the President of the United States to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization until his death.

He is called a "fair, just and unprejudiced" judge and "a great public servant."

Biographical Directory
of the
United States Congress



1774 - Present

- ★ Biography
- ★ Research Collections
- ★ Bibliography
- ★ New Search
- ★ House History Page
- ★ Senate History Page
- ★ Copyright Information

GEORGE, Walter Franklin, 1878-1957

Senate Years of Service: 1922-1957

Party: Democrat



GEORGE, Walter Franklin, a Senator from Georgia; born on a farm near Preston, Webster County, Ga., January 29, 1878; attended the common schools; graduated from Mercer University, Macon, Ga., in 1900 and from its law department in 1901; admitted to the bar in 1901 and commenced practice in Vienna, Ga.; solicitor general of the Cordele judicial circuit 1907-1912 and judge of the superior court 1912-1917; judge of the State court of appeals from January to October 1917, when he resigned; associate justice of the State supreme court 1917-1922, when he resigned; elected on November 7, 1922, as a Democrat to the United States Senate to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Thomas E. Watson; reelected in 1926, 1932, 1938, 1944, and again in 1950 and served from November 22, 1922, to January 2, 1957; was not a candidate for renomination in 1956; served as President pro tempore of the Senate during the Eighty-fourth Congress; chairman, Committee on Privileges and Elections (Seventy-third through Seventy-sixth Congresses), Committee on Foreign Relations (Seventy-sixth, Seventy-seventh, and Eighty-fourth Congresses), Committee on Finance (Seventy-seventh through Seventy-ninth Congresses and Eighty-first and Eighty-second Congresses), Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation (Eighty-first and Eighty-second Congresses), Select Committee on Case Influence (Eighty-fourth Congress), Special Committee on Foreign Assistance (Eighty-fourth Congress); President Dwight Eisenhower's special ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization until his death; died in Vienna, Ga., August 4, 1957; interment in Vienna Cemetery.

Bibliography

Dictionary of American Biography; Mellichamp, Josephine. 'Walter George.' pp. 230-39. In *Senators From Georgia*. Huntsville, Ala.: Strode Publishers, 1976; Zeigler, Luther. 'Senator Walter George's 1938 Campaign.' *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 43 (December 1959): 333-52.

George, Walter (29 Jan. 1878-4 Aug. 1957), judge and U.S. Senator from Georgia, was born Walter Franklin George on a farm near Preston, Georgia, the son of sharecroppers Robert Theodoric George and Sarah Stapleton George. George's formative years in hardscrabble South Georgia imbued him with an understanding of the struggles of the common man. His father subscribed to the *Congressional Record*, and young George studied it intently, often memorizing speeches. This oratorical bent germinated while he attended the Houston Institute, a public school near Cordele. At sixteen, when selected as a last-minute substitute speaker before a large Confederate Memorial Day crowd, he extemporaneously embellished a speech he had memorized on Robert E. Lee, which the audience responded to enthusiastically. The experience made him decide on the law as a career. In 1900, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Mercer University, a Baptist institution in Macon. He taught grade school to finance his way through Mercer's law school, which today bears his name. He graduated in 1901. That year he was admitted to the bar, purchased the practice of a young lawyer in Vienna, Georgia, and immediately embarked on a winning streak so formidable that colleagues in the area sought other work to supplement their income.

In 1903, he married Lucy Heard of Vienna. They had two sons. George's manner in personal relationships was so reserved, low-key, and Victorian that he even called his wife "Miss Lucy." She called him "Mr. George."

In 1906, George ran for solicitor of the Vienna city court as a Democrat in the functionally one-party South and established his career-long precedent of winning every election. In the next eleven years he attained increasingly responsible prosecuting and judicial positions, highlighted by his service on the Georgia Supreme Court as associate justice from 1917 to 1922. In 1922, he resigned to handle the estate of his father-in-law, Joseph Heard; but when Senator Thomas E. Watson died on 26 September 1922, George won the seven-candidate race for his seat. He deftly appealed to Watson's old South Georgia political base and the state's business interests in the campaign. By then, the intense patriotic fever that had characterized the nation's entry into World War I had already receded into often bitter disillusionment. George's platform repudiated further foreign alliances, immigration, foreign loans, and involvement with the League of Nations. He advocated strengthening the Volstead Act and opposed a bonus for veterans--a stance he would reverse in the 1930s.

In 1932 George, though initially unimpressed with Franklin D. Roosevelt, acquired a deep respect for his political acumen and determination to ameliorate the effects of the Great Depression. Despite initial misgivings about creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority, George finally supported the measure. He more emphatically supported New Deal initiatives such as the Social Security Act, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and legislation that established such landmark institutions as the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Rural Electric Administration.

George opposed the president on other important measures, however, including the "death sentence" for utility holding companies, the Wages and Hours Act, and the Wagner housing measure. Like many other Democrats in the Senate, George also opposed the Judicial Reorganization Act of 1937 (known as the Supreme Court packing scheme). It perhaps grated more tellingly on the president, however, when in the wake of that sustained public humiliation George frequently joined fellow Southern senators in opposing the administration on a number of other issues.

By the summer of 1938, Roosevelt's attempts to liberalize the party had only been marginally successful. Although liberals such as Alben Barkley had been renominated in Kentucky, and Lyndon Johnson, among others, had secured nominations in Texas, conservatives such as Guy Gillette in Iowa and Alvin Adams in Colorado had more than offset those liberal gains in the Senate. FDR therefore worked to defeat the renomination of George, a major part of a southern strategy that also targeted Senators Ellison DuRant "Cotton Ed" Smith, of South Carolina, and Millard Tydings, of Maryland.

In August 1938 Georgia was almost frantic with anticipation when FDR accepted an invitation to appear at the Gordon Institute Stadium at Barnesville, ostensibly to throw a switch to provide electricity for the first time to 357 rural families. On 11 August, before a crowd of 50,000 spectators, FDR endorsed Federal District Attorney Lawrence S. Camp, attacked George, and comically forgot all about the switch in the process. Though he projected a tone of personal respect and friendship to George, his speech otherwise was a clear and determined effort to portray him as a reactionary obstacle to the progress of the common man in Georgia. The tumultuous reaction of the crowd made George's humble retort inaudible to all but a few around the platform. After shaking hands with the president, George replied, "Mr. President, I regret that you have taken this occasion to question my democracy and to attack my public record. I want you to know that I accept that challenge."

Though Woodrow Wilson had written a single letter in an attempt to defeat isolationist Tom Hardwick in 1918, this level of presidential intervention in Georgia politics was unprecedented. Many newspaper editors complained of FDR's interference, and George exploited this resentment. George, who had not even made a speech on his own behalf since 1926, now embarked on a brilliant campaign against Camp and Eugene Talmadge.

By stressing his humble tenant farmer roots and awakening the deep resentment that much of white Georgia still felt over the Civil War and Reconstruction, he switched the focus of the campaign from social and economic issues. In their place, he coaxed an empathy from Georgians for one of their own, and exploited their deep resentment toward the federal government. After many of his speeches, George and much of his audience were in tears. The band played "Dixie" at the end of each rally. George also fully exploited the archaic county unit system in place at the time, initially implemented as one tool to end Reconstruction. It maximized the influence of the least densely populated rural areas and minimized the relative strength of urban areas and the more heavily populated rural counties. George won only a plurality of the popular vote, but swept to victory with 59 percent of the unit vote. His success rendered FDR's 1938 purge an exercise in futility in the South. Smith in South Carolina and Tydings in Maryland were also elected.

The outbreak of the war in Europe reunited FDR and the southern Democrats, including the previously isolationist George. George's conversion was neither instantaneous nor total. He opposed, for instance, cash-and-carry arms sales to the European democracies. By 1940, however, when Key Pittman (D-Nev.) died and George ascended to the helm of Foreign Relations, George successfully argued that Great Britain was our first line of defense, that by making her defenses stronger we would strengthen our own, and that a viable Great Britain would improve U.S. industries and make the nation more self-reliant. He stressed that if Great Britain fell--as appeared chillingly possible at the time--the target was America. The bill was reported favorably out of Foreign Relations 15-8 on 13 February 1941. Before it passed the Senate about three weeks later, nerve-wracking amendments had to be voted down or molded into something that would not dilute what George termed its "moral effect" on the world. The House of Representatives passed the bill as amended by

the Senate on 11 March 1941.

Little more than three months later, on Pat Harrison's death, George gave up the chairmanship of Foreign Relations to become chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. The changes that transpired during his leadership were complex and essential to the successful prosecution of the war. Some indication of their magnitude can be gleaned from the fact that the number of Americans who had to file income tax returns increased from seven million in 1941 to forty-two million in 1942. The fact that George marched overwhelmingly in tandem with the administration during the war did not wholly mitigate his independent streak nor erase all old enmities. A day or so after Finance unanimously rejected a proposal advanced by Henry Morgenthau, secretary of the Treasury and close personal friend of the president, George proposed his own flat Five Percent Victory Tax. It was implemented into law despite Treasury's well-founded conviction that it bore unjustly on low-income families, was only half as productive as the rejected scheme, and did not have comparable inflationary brakes.

In 1943, George's son, a navy flier, went down over the Atlantic while searching for a downed plane. Two years later, George made an eloquent speech in the Senate endorsing the charter of the United Nations. He portrayed it as the best hope for the fulfillment of the peace promised to those who had died in the war.

George waged many battles with both the Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower administrations against what he considered excessive spending and high taxes. When the Democrats regained majority status in Congress in 1955, George began his second, lengthier tenure as chairman of Foreign Relations, leaving the stewardship of Finance to Harry F. Byrd (D-Va.). George's relationship with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, nurtured through weekly breakfast meetings, was mutually respectful. George helped steer Eisenhower's controversial Formosa Resolution through the Senate. This authorized the president to use military force to defend Formosa and the Pescadores Islands against armed attack, along with any other territories necessary to defend those islands. Later George urged the administration to seek a Far Eastern Conference with Peking without National Chinese representation, a bold stance at the time that drew the ire of Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisc.) and other hard-line Cold Warriors. Though negotiations on that basis were eventually held, the administration entered them with rigidly fixed positions that ensured failure.

George's last accomplishment concerned his sponsorship of a law that allowed totally disabled workers to collect Social Security benefits at the age of 50 and enabled working women to retire earlier. His Senate colleague from Georgia, Richard Russell, said that George was prouder of that law than any other single piece of legislation in his long career. At 78, George somewhat bitterly decided not to run for reelection in 1956. Though the reason given was health, he knew that defeating 42-year-old Governor Herman Talmadge, son of Eugene, would be difficult. Though George had been a consistent, if sometimes understated by deep South standards, white supremacist throughout his career, Talmadge's more caustically articulated stands made him a formidable potential opponent, particularly in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*. President Eisenhower appointed George special ambassador to NATO after he retired from the Senate in January 1957. George died in Vienna, Georgia.

George was a leader who demonstrated an ability to grow in terms of outlook throughout his career. Though his national reputation never matched his influence in the Senate, that

influence grew formidably in his more than thirty-four years in that body. Presidents, fellow legislators, and other actors in the political arena ignored his toughness, shrewdness, and deliberate nature at their own expense. Time and again he demonstrated a propensity to go against the grain at key points in his career, but his innate caution usually made him do so only when there was enough political cover to make success likely. On matters of race, though never as hateful as contemporaries Theodore G. Bilbo (D-Miss.) or fellow Georgians Eugene and Herman Talmadge, George consistently conformed with the political status quo of the Jim Crow South; his poor record was typical of the time and place. The best that might be said in that area was that he usually supported New Deal endeavors that economically aided his African-American constituents. Though he contributed to and supported many initiatives that aided the common man and woman, he was careful not to alienate the business interests that constituted such an important part of his political base. Always mindful of frugality, he possessed the flexible intelligence to recognize when greater goals necessitated its temporary abandonment. His influence on foreign affairs was even more notable. If Lend-Lease had not been passed, Great Britain and the Soviet Union might not have endured the German onslaught.

George's longevity allowed him to reap the full benefits of the seniority system: he served on twelve Senate committees (was chairman of five, including Foreign Affairs twice and Finance) and one joint committee. His deepest imprints were felt in matters of finance--particularly taxation--and foreign affairs, though his expertise was also eventually recognized on many agricultural and educational issues. Neither a visionary nor a demagogue, George was a man of clear talent and ambition who took on the world as it was and usually succeeded in making his imprint felt.

Bibliography

There are a number of research collections around the country with useful primary sources dealing with George. Three of the most bountiful are located in Hyde Park, N.Y., at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; in Savannah, Ga., at the Georgia Historical Society; and in Atlanta, Ga., at Emory University's Robert W. Woodruff Library. The Library of Congress in Washington is a repository for many reports and prints of the various committees that George sat on during his Senate career. It also houses such all but disappeared gems as a radio address with Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn given on 16 March 1954 that gave the nation the Democratic side of a pending tax cut. Though George's import is certainly deserving of major biographical treatment, it has not happened yet. In the meantime, the younger reader may gain a good idea of his life and times by investigating Josephine Mellichamp's *Senators from Georgia* (1976). Those interested in his domestic prewar relations with the New Deal administrative machinery will find Michael S. Holmes's *The New Deal in Georgia* (1975) insightful. A well-written, hugely entertaining--though occasionally inaccurate--partisan critique of George's Senate career through his pivotal 1938 campaign is contained in Allan A. Michie and Frank Ryhlick's *Dixie Demagogues* (1939). The best known, though somewhat reverential and otherwise less-than-evenhanded treatment of George's 1938 campaign was Luther H. Zeigler, Jr.'s contribution to vol.33, no.4 of the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (Dec. 1959). Kenneth S. Davis puts George's accomplishments during a crucial point of his service to the country in wonderful perspective just before he died in *FDR, the War President, 1940-1943* (2000). Many facets

of George's second term as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee are adroitly addressed by Richard A. Melanson and David Mayers in *Reevaluating Eisenhower* (1987). A front-page obituary is in the *New York Times*, 5 Aug. 1957.

Paul T. Sayers

Online Resources

- Learning about the Senate: Francis O. Wilcox
http://www.senate.gov/learning/learn_history_oralhist_wilcox.html
From the Senate Historical Office, a revealing interview with the chief of staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1947-1955.
- George, Walter Franklin, 1878-1957
<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=G000131>
From the Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, a general biography and a brief bibliography.

[Back to the top](#)

Citation:

Paul T. Sayers. "George, Walter";

<http://www.anb.org/articles/07/07-00773.html>;

American National Biography Online October 2002 Update.

Access Date: Mon Aug 30 16:59:00 EDT 2004

Copyright © 2002 American Council of Learned Societies. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.