

THE MASK OF THE SOUTHERN LADY:
VIRGINIA FOSTER DURR, SOUTHERN
WOMANHOOD AND REFORM

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION: PUTTING ON THE MASK	1
I. GROWING UP IN THE SOUTH.....	15
II. MARRIAGE AND DEPRESSION.....	34
III. POLITICAL INITIATION.....	47
IV. SCHW AND THE FIGHT AGAINST THE POLL TAX.....	67
V. THE WAR YEARS.....	91
VI. RUNNING WITH HENRY WALLACE, 1948.....	125
VII. A HEARING IN NEW ORLEANS.....	165
VIII. THE MONTGOMERY FIGHT.....	206
IX. CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE TURBULENT 60s.....	232
X. CONCLUSION: THE MASK AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE	260
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	267
APPENDIX	281

INTRODUCTION

PUTTING ON THE MASK

In March of 1954, Virginia Foster Durr took the stand in a courtroom in New Orleans, Louisiana. The charge leveled at Durr by the Senate Internal Subcommittee was that of communist subversion. Through the Senate investigation, Mississippi Congressman James Eastland sought to further his political career by joining the anti-communist bandwagon and ridding the South of suspected communists. Virginia Durr, along with James Dombrowski, Aubrey Williams, Myles Horton, and two other men, stood before the committee to defend herself against the charges. Although Durr refused to invoke her Fifth Amendment right, she also refused to answer any of the committee's questions, other than her name and that she was not a communist. To all other questions she replied, "I stand mute." During the questioning, Durr not only refused to answer the committee's charges, she also periodically reached into her purse and pulled out her compact, dabbing her nose with powder. It was a bold stand in the face of communist accusations and a deliberate protestation against the questioning of her loyalty. It was also a determined move to demonstrate her position as a Southern lady who was not accountable to men like James Eastland.

Virginia Durr was one of several notable Southern liberals whose activism has gained the attention of historians in recent years. The Southern liberal movement, as it

operated during the New Deal until the start of the modern Civil Rights Movement, was not static, and the concept of liberalism and a liberal movement underwent a radical redefinition in American life, starting with the Progressive movement and traversing the New Deal era. According to Alonzo Hamby, New Deal liberalism embraced the Progressives' call for increased government regulation in an attempt to promote democracy and economic fairness. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal merely expanded the Progressive reforms. The New Deal's success "lay in the actual adoption of a massive body of reform legislation and in the construction of a strong, effective liberal political coalition."¹

While Southern liberals adhered to Hamby's analysis of the role of the federal government in society, they added another element to their liberalism—that of racial equality. Their conception of race relations and their denouncement of segregation, more than any other stand set white Southern liberals apart from their contemporaries below the Mason-Dixon line. According to historian Morton Sosna, "the ultimate test of the white Southern liberal was his willingness or unwillingness to criticize racial mores."² Other scholars of these New Deal Southern liberals generally concur with Sosna's assessment. It was race, more than economics or New Deal programs, that characterized the nature of Southern liberalism for the generation before the Civil Rights Movement.³

¹ Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), xv.

² Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), viii.

³ For studies on Southern liberals and liberalism between the wars, see Anthony Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981); John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). In recent years various biographies have been produced that examines Southern liberals of this generation. See Frank T. Adams, *James A. Dombrowski: An American Heretic, 1897-1983* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992);

Debate surrounds the actual effectiveness of Southern liberals on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but some scholars believe they were vital. Patricia Sullivan argues that “the activists of the earlier decades tilled the ground for future change. They created legal precedents, experimented with new political forms, and organized around issues of social and economic justice.”⁴ One of the most ardent Southern activists of the period was Virginia Foster Durr.

As a white Southern woman, Durr certainly faced numerous obstacles as she agitated for change. Working in a region in which patriarchy remained entrenched, Durr had to, at time, manipulate her position in society in order to be effective in her work. Historians are only beginning to explore how Southern women with their unique set of social ‘scripts’ refigured their role and worked within its confines. Anne Firor Scott’s seminal work, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, provided one of the first examinations of modern Southern women working to enact social change. Since then, other histories have examined Southern women, either collectively or individually, to understand fully both women’s agency, as well as the concept of the Southern ‘lady,’ which prevailed long after the surrender at Appomatox.⁵ A close examination of

Jacquelyn Dowd-Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Richard B. Henderson, *Maury Maverick: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970); Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South, A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); John A. Salmond, *The Conscience of a Lawyer: Clifford J. Durr and American Civil Liberties, 1899-1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990); John A. Salmond, *Miss Lucy of the CIO: The Life and Times of Lucy Randolph Mason, 1882-1959* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

⁴ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 275.

⁵ See Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Bernhard, et. al., *Southern Women*; Janet L. Coryell, et. al., eds, *Negotiating the Boundaries of Southern Womanhood: Dealing with the Powers that Be* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); Michele Gillespie and Catherine Clinton, eds., *Taking off the White Gloves: Southern Women and Women Historians* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998); Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp, eds., *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983); Anastatia

Virginia Foster Durr reveals not only Southern women's activities between the wars (and, in Durr's case, long after) but also how Southern women's reconstruction of their identities in a region that maintained strict conventions regarding feminine behavior. Her life also demonstrates the intersection of race and class and illustrates how these mutually reinforcing roles prompted Durr to take an unpopular stand against segregation and discrimination.

Virginia Durr's life, while illustrating the characteristics as well as the limitations of Southern liberalism, also explores characteristics of Southern womanhood between the suffrage movement and the modern women's movement of the 1960s. Essential in examining Southern women's history is coming to terms with the concept of the "Southern lady." Historian Anne Firor Scott defines the Southern lady as innocent (particularly of sex), self-sacrificing, submissive, and striving for perfection.⁶ Virginia Durr's definition was not dissimilar: "she subordinates herself entirely to her husband, to her family, she is self-sacrificing, she's selfless, she's devoted, and she's loyal."⁷ The Southern lady was both idolized by, and subservient to, the white male, who served as both her master and her protector. In the decades following Reconstruction, the "ideal of the southern lady. . . increasingly imprisoned elite white women within the constraints of their class, race, and gender."⁸ While women like Virginia Durr certainly did not ascribe to all aspects of the demure Southern lady, its prevailing image permeated Southern

Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997); Barbara Ellen Smith, ed. *Neither Separate Nor Equal: Women, Race, and Class in the New South* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Wolfe, *Daughters of Canaan*.

⁶ Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 14-15.

⁷ Virginia Foster Durr, interview with Mary Walton Livingston, transcript, 17 October 1967, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, 22.

⁸ Virginia Bernhard, et. al, eds, *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 3.

society well into the second half of the twentieth century.⁹ It also provided leverage for many politically active women at a time when society increasingly pressured women to “contain” their activities in the home.

As a white Southern woman, Virginia Durr, along with activist women like Jessie Daniel Ames and Lucy Randolph Mason, realized the advantage of using the construction of the Southern lady to her advantage. Like Ames, Durr, “wore ladyhood as a mask.”¹⁰ Pushing for controversial legislation and challenging the politically charged issue of race relations, women between the wars deemed it necessary to express their femininity in the face of hostility. Certainly the idea of using femininity and feminine virtues was not unknown to women activists. Historians have examined this concept in various works, particularly those studying the First Wave woman’s movement. Yet, the use of Southern womanhood extended far beyond the passage of woman’s suffrage and gave voice and power to women reared in a region where female activism threatened to undermine the patriarchal system.¹¹ Examining these women on an individual basis provides insight as to how Southern women affected change in a region where the white majority adamantly opposed any alteration of racial or gender relations.

Although biography is often discredited as a method for historical analysis, due to its specific nature, Joan Scott argues that it is one of the most valuable tools for examining women’s lives and the role of gender. Writing almost a decade ago, Scott

⁹ Even today, images of the Southern “belle,” although liberated from political and social restraints, are still held as the standard for proper Southern girls. For example, see Maryln Schwartz, *A Southern Belle Primer: Or Why Princess Margaret Will Never Be a Kappa Kappa Gamma* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Although humorous in its portrayal of the Southern belle, not a few women in the South still abide by many of its dictations, even in the proper making of chicken salad and the importance of sorority rush.

¹⁰ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Lives Through Time: Second Thoughts on Jessie Daniel Ames,” in Alpern, et. al, eds., *The Challenge*, 43. Hall maintains that the women in the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching used their status as middle class white women and ‘southern ladies’ to persuade men to enact protective legislation for African Americans.

¹¹ See also Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*; Salmond, *Miss Lucy*.

claims they provide and excellent means of addressing “the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of cultural representations.”¹² In recent years, feminist biographies have attempted to grapple with women who often embraced, or, at minimum, failed to reject, traditional societal gender roles. Although each woman’s life offers a unique experience, Maureen Quilligan argues that the feminist biographer “begins with uniqueness,” but must also “discover what the unique subject shares with all womankind.”¹³ Feminist biography is also more likely to demonstrate how the personal and private intersect and how the two mutually reinforce one another to inform the given subject’s desire, passions, and frustrations.¹⁴

The shared experience among women, is, without a doubt, their gender. Despite the divisive issues of class, race, and ethnicity, most women continued to operate under the prevailing system of gender roles, defined, unarguably, by men. But the fact that some women, like Virginia Durr, failed to challenge the prescribed gender norms does not constitute powerlessness. For gender, according to Dee Garrison, “is itself a cultural masquerade, a set of roles all must play, and the social scriptedness of the role of woman is one of the most problematic for any individual woman to perform.”¹⁵ During her years of activism, Durr learned how to play out the masquerade, adopting various roles depending upon the obstacles she faced. Southern women who enacted change in their

¹² Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 22, 45; for an examination of the political act of writing autobiography and memory, see Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 773-797.

¹³ Maureen Quilligan, “Rewriting History: The Difference of Feminist Biography,” *The Yale Review* (Winter 1988): 286.

¹⁴ Dee Garrison, “Two Roads Taken: Writing the Biography of Mary Heaton Vorse,” in Sara Alpern, et.al., eds., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992): 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

region had to master the art of identity masquerade, bending the rules when necessary, but never outright overturning them.

Scholars of the Civil Rights Movement and the modern South are familiar with Virginia Foster Durr. Historians have chronicled her work in the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax and her activities during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.¹⁶ Historian Martha Swain states that Virginia Durr “has been vital in almost every liberal movement since the 1930s.”¹⁷ During the New Deal era, Virginia became one of the leaders of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, an organization associated with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. During the Civil Rights Movement, Durr took a front row seat during the Montgomery Bus Boycott and worked, often behind the scenes, to foster racial equality and cooperation between Southern whites and blacks. In her later years, Virginia became committed to the modern women’s movement, although she consistently criticized the role of women in Southern society throughout her lifetime. Consequently, Virginia Durr has been included in a list of distinguished Southern liberals that operated between the wars and into the modern civil rights era. What makes Durr, along with liberals like James Dombrowski, Myles Horton, Lillian Smith, and others, unique is the fact that she was simultaneously white and Southern.

¹⁶ For a few of the studies of the modern Civil Rights Movement that mention Durr’s activism, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2000); Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1994); Fred D. Gray, *Bus Ride to Justice: Changing the System by the System* (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1995); Steven Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home, Birmingham, Alabama: The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

¹⁷ Martha H. Swain, “The Public Role of Southern Women,” in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 54.

Despite being recognized as a civil rights pioneer, Durr's role as white Southern woman within the movement has yet to be fully examined. Virginia Durr did not simply turn her back on her region and become a race liberal. She worked, at times, within its framework, fully aware of the culture that surrounded her while simultaneously trying to effect change. Most scholars accept Durr's assertion that she turned her back on her Southern heritage and embraced radical racial ideas. While Durr's views on race and race relations certainly broke from the Southern tradition of segregation and racism, she maintained a paternalistic view of African Americans. Durr regarded herself as a member of a "ruling race" whose duty was to *help* blacks achieve equality. Her initial interest in abolishing the poll tax sprang, not from a desire for racial equality, but from a sense of outrage at the treatment of Southern white women and their lack of political power. Many scholars have argued that Virginia Durr completely abandoned her "aristocratic" upbringing when she turned her back on the tradition of the Lost Cause.¹⁸ Yet, a closer look demonstrates that she did not abandon the paternalism that defined many whites in their relationship to Southern blacks. Like Durr's contemporary, Sarah Patton Boyle, it was the class-conscience idea of *noblesse oblige* which guided Durr's activism.¹⁹

Durr's views on race began to alter during the 1930s, primarily due to her relationship with African-American women such as Mary McLeod Bethune. While Durr admired women like Bethune, she continued to regard them as "mother-figures."

¹⁸ For example, see Dale Russakoff, "Aristocrat to Activist: Virginia Durr's Story of the Civil Rights Movement," *Washington Post*, 25 November 1985; Robin Toner, "To Be Young, Southern, and Liberal," *New York Times*, 21 November 1985, B14; "Old Terrorist," *The New Yorker*, 6 September 1993, 31-32; Wendy Gimble, "Pride of Place," *The Nation*, 29 March 1986, 463-464.

¹⁹ See Jennifer Ritterhouse, "Speaking of Race: Sarah Patton Boyle and the 'T.J. Sellers Course for Backward Southern Whites,'" in *Sex, Love, and Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, Martha Hodes, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 491-513.

Replacing the black nurse of Durr's childhood, Bethune became a guardian of Durr's new racial liberation. As late as the 1950s, Durr felt that African Americans needed her help in order to achieve freedom and equality; her status as a white Southerner could gain support for their cause, more so than they could do on their own. While Durr's views could hardly be considered racist, they were infused with a paternalism that she never quite overcame during her life. By the end of the 1960s, when more militant civil rights groups began to purge whites from their ranks, Durr became increasingly bitter that African Americans did not welcome her at the forefront of the movement.

Later in life, Durr recognized the unique role she played in the fight for civil rights. In 1985 Durr published her autobiography, *Outside the Magic Circle*. Durr's autobiography was not penned herself, but was edited and compiled from a series of oral interviews she gave for the Southern Oral History Project in the 1970s. Yet, the book served as one of many racial conversion narratives produced after the 1940s. Fred Hobson compares the emergence of the racial conversion narratives among Southern woman to a type of Puritan conversion experience in which the participants "confess racial wrongdoings and are 'converted,' in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment."²⁰ Along with women like Sarah Patton Boyle, Lillian Smith, and Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin, Durr sought to examine her Southern heritage, its inconsistencies, and the point at which she achieved a type of "secular salvation."²¹

Virginia Durr was one of many Southerners who "abandoned regional self-congratulation

²⁰ Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4. For examples, see Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1961); Sarah Patton Boyle, *The Desegregated Heart: A Virginian's Stand in Time of Transition*, 2d ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

for lacerating self-criticism.”²² Durr’s autobiography, by its very nature, involves both remembering and forgetting. Autobiographies allow writers to reconstruct themselves and their identity. According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, the intersection of personal memory and history involves four elements: personal memories, social memories, history, and political imagination.²³ While Hall argues that historians should learn to value personal memory, scholars cannot take all personal memories, and the ways in which the teller constructs, or reconstructs, his or herself, entirely at face value. Yet, the two are inseparable and an essential part of examining an individual’s life experience.

What is most important in both Durr’s autobiography, as well as in her massive lifetime correspondence, is her construction of herself. Durr’s creation of her identity differed during her life. During her youth, she was the Southern “belle”; upon marriage, she assumed the role of the domestic, yet socially active, housewife. After moving to Washington D.C., the threefold components of her identity--Southerner, white, and lady--emerged. It was only after the Durrs returned to the South in 1952 that Durr added one more component to her construction of self: outsider.

Virginia Durr claimed the status of “outsider” both in her autobiography as well as in the countless interviews she gave before her death. Yet, the image of Durr as an outsider is one that she constructed from personal memory. Certainly, Durr’s racial views set her apart from most of her white Southern contemporaries, and when the Durrs returned to Montgomery in the early 1950s, she felt an acute sense of isolation there.

²² Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Practical Truths: Writing Southern Women’s History,” in Virginia Bernhard , et. al., eds., *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992): 27.

²³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “ ‘You Must Remember This’: Autobiography as Social Critique,” *Journal of American History* 85 (September 1998): 442-443. By personal memory, Hall refers to memories that come with the passage of time, as opposed to social memories, or collective memories, which are shared among members of a society. History, Hall defines, as the reconstruction of the past from documentation and political imagination involves the future hope that the study of the past attempts to create.

Yet, it was only upon returning to the South that Virginia began to call herself an outsider. During the 1930s and 1940s, it was her position as a white Southerner that gave her the leverage to fight against the poll tax. She spoke, not as an exile, but as a Southerner committed to improving conditions in the South. Even more important, when she advocated change in her region, she spoke as a Southern *lady*.

Virginia Durr certainly did not represent the Southern “belle” according to her definition of the term. She was loquacious, strong-willed, and unafraid to make a controversial stand or express her opinion. Described as a “techni-color woman,” a Southern belle “on phenobarbital,” and a “cross between Jane Addams and Zelda Fitzgerald,” Durr refused to embrace the submissive lady modeled to her during her youth.²⁴ Yet, her personality did not detract from the image she constructed of herself to others. Working on the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax (NCAPT) brought her into the public spotlight in Washington D.C., and also brought her into contact with male congressmen. Virginia loved men, and she loved to flirt, and she used these ‘gifts’ to her advantage.²⁵ Durr, like many Southern women, understood that “a polite request from a soft-spoken southern lady was more effective than a strident demand from a virago.”²⁶ Wearing pretty dresses and flowery hats, she was able to make herself heard by the simple expedient of being a lady. Had she denounced all elements of the Southern belle and rejected the Southern concept of lady-like behavior, she would easily have been dismissed, both at the capitol and back home in Alabama.

²⁴ Lucy Durr Hackney, telephone interview with author, tape recording, Amarillo, Texas, 22 November 2004; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 91; Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 80-81.

²⁵ Hackney interview.

²⁶ Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 5.

Another element essential to Durr's self-construction was her belief in being a part of the ruling class. Although Virginia did not grow up amid wealth, her family had prominent standing in Birmingham, Alabama, and this alone allowed her to consider herself part of the upper class.²⁷ A self-described Southern snob, Virginia remained conscious of class throughout her life. It was, more than race, the dividing factor between respectability and being "common." Like many white Southerners, Durr did not view financial stability as the guideline to measure one's place in society. In Durr's view, men like Senator Jim Eastland could have ample wealth, yet still be as "common as pig tracks."²⁸ For Virginia Durr, the key factors were family standing and good manners. Graciousness, kindness, and hospitality were hallmarks of all Southern belles, and her Southern breeding burned them into her consciousness from birth. According to Hobson, Durr believed that segregation "was morally wrong," but also believed that "it was, quite simply, bad manners."²⁹ Adhering to the Southern social code provided Virginia with a sense of community. Belonging to a set society comprised an important part of her identity. Durr's personal and social identity served as a source of power and allowed her to participate in the political and social struggles that surrounded her.

Although Virginia Durr is often remembered as a loquacious and determined activist, even once described as "an absolute bitching terror" by Jessica Mitford, she had another side.³⁰ Like her mother and sister, Virginia suffered from bouts of depression. In her years of activism, particularly when she returned home to Alabama, she felt an

²⁷ According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Jessie Daniel Ames maintained a similar association with an upper class family from Texas. Like Durr, this accorded her the class leverage needed to further her cause. See Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 15.

²⁸ Russakoff, "Aristocrat to Activist," C1.

²⁹ Hobson, *But Now I See*, 125.

³⁰ "Old Terrorist," 32.

intense isolation and loneliness. A mother of four girls, Durr struggled to balance her activities with her roles as wife and mother, often relying upon servants to aid in her domestic duties. Virginia loved knowledge yet found her education cut short when her parents could no longer afford to pay her tuition. Although striving for social change, Durr deeply longed to become a writer, and she penned numerous short stories and poems. She loved Jane Austen and often found solace and escape in her works. A close friend of Virginia Durr, Jessica Mitford, described Durr as

a real spellbinder. . .whose particular charm lay in her enormous curiosity about people, her driving passion to find out things, to know about details and motives, to trace big events to their small beginnings. No wonder she loved Jane Austen!³¹

Nevertheless, Virginia found her own literary dreams overshadowed by circumstance and by her personal quest for social justice. Focusing on her activism, Durr's autobiography often obscures her struggles with loneliness, insecurity, and disappointment.

For Virginia Durr, powdering her nose before Eastland's committee represented more than a simple snubbing of the committee's authority. Durr was not only challenging Eastland, she was also openly demonstrating her position within Southern society as that of a lady. Durr practiced what Linda Alcoff has termed "identity politics," choosing her identity within a group as her "political point of departure."³² The serene, proper, and untroubled mask of Southern womanhood that Durr applied served her well during her years of activism. Southern women like Virginia Durr manipulated and, at times, hid behind the façade of respectability and social position to enact social change.

³¹ Jessica Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 3rd ed. (London: Orion Books, 2000), 206.

³² Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 13 (Spring 1988): 432.

It was, ironically, a source of power for many Southern women, paving the way for future activists to ‘take off the white gloves.’

Virginia Durr was one of many Southern women who helped pave the way for future Southern activists, such as Constance Curry and Casey Hayden, who readily recognize their contributions. According to Nancy Cott, it was the women between the suffrage movement of the early twentieth century and the modern women’s movement after World War II that paved the way for modern feminism. These women, including Durr, expanded their focus to include not only the limitations placed on white women, but also those placed on women of color or differing economic, political, or ethnic backgrounds.³³ However, in order to understand fully the position of Southern women--and Southern liberals--during this period, one must understand of the context in which they operated. Women like Durr took another approach to protest than the 1960s generation. Given the society and periods in which she worked, Durr learned to maneuver within those constraints and rarely challenged prevailing gender constructions. Durr’s life and activism provides a powerful lens for examining these issues, as well as the ability of some Southern women to use their status as proper ladies to further controversial issues.

³³ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 7, 10.

CHAPTER I

GROWING UP IN THE SOUTH

In 1959 Ralph McGill wrote “To have been, and to be a Southerner in all these years is the finest sort of luck. But I know from being with them that to be young Southerners is the most delightful, mystical, and wonderful agony of all.”³⁴ Such a description would certainly characterize Virginia Foster Durr’s feelings of her Southern roots. Durr was proud of her Southern heritage; it was, after all, an extremely important aspect of her identity. Yet, she also recognized the “wonderful agony of it all,” as she spent the majority of her life recognizing the ironies and hypocrisies that made Southern society so baffling, yet intriguing.

Durr’s childhood was not an uncommon one for white Southern girls of the middle-class. Her family’s legacy gave her status in a society that venerated family ancestors and its past. Little in Durr’s early childhood gave her cause to question the social mores of the South. Although she later noticed the contradictions and hypocrisy that surrounded her, she often recalled her childhood as a happy, contented period. Only when she moved out of the South to attend college did she slowly begin to question her upbringing, particularly in regards to the status of women in the South as well the treatment of African Americans. It was, however, a slow conversion that was by no means accomplished during her adolescence.

³⁴ Ralph McGill, *The South and the Southerner* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1959), 18.

Virginia Heard Foster was born in Birmingham, Alabama, the third child of a Presbyterian minister. Her ancestors arrived in America around the 1700s. The family moved south during the Revolutionary War, where Virginia's great-grandfather acquired land in Georgia after his military service under General Greene. Virginia's grandfather, Sterling Foster, was one of thirteen children who became a doctor after graduating from Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia. Sterling Foster's first cousin, Colonel Wilbur Foster, aided in the founding of Tuskegee Institute, an act that quickly labeled him a "nigger lover" in Alabama.³⁵ In the 1840s, Sterling Foster married Virginia Heard and settled on a plantation in Union Springs, Alabama, bringing his slaves with them. There, the Fosters raised their family, including Sterling Johnson, Virginia's father. A Whig, Sterling Foster Sr., opposed the Civil War and refused to buy Confederate bonds.³⁶ Foster managed to safeguard his wealth during the war by sending his cotton to Liverpool, England and keeping his profit there.³⁷ In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Fosters prospered by buying land that had been lost by Confederates and extended the plantation to approximately 35,000 acres. Foster's opposition to the Confederacy was a matter of shame for the family, and his only redemption was that he had acquired wealth.³⁸

Virginia's maternal great-grandfather, Greene P. Rice, moved to Morgan County, Alabama from Tennessee in 1831. Rice served as a lawyer, a judge, and as a member of

³⁵ Virginia Foster Durr to Judge Walter B. Jones, July 1952, Marie Jemison Papers, Box 1 Folder 15, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama (hereafter cited as MJ Papers).

³⁶ Virginia Foster Durr, interview by Sue Thrasher and Jacqueline Hall, transcript, part I, March 15, 1975, Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1-4; see also Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 3-5. Hollinger Barnard drew Durr's autobiography for *Outside the Magic Circle* from the Thrasher and Hall interview. Therefore, the information cited in her autobiography can also be found in the interview. Unless otherwise noted, I will be citing the autobiography.

³⁷ Virginia Durr, "Grace and Guts," *Southern Changes* (Oct-Dec. 1985): 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

the state legislature until 1855. A contemporary of Rice's described him as a man of "commanding figure, and formal but suave address. . . he was a man of some culture and native talent. He was also warm-hearted, hospitable, and exemplary in his conduct."³⁹ His son-in-law and Virginia's maternal grandfather, Josiah Patterson, was a self-made man from the Tennessee Valley. Josiah made a name for himself during the Civil War, serving under Nathan Bedford Forest. Returning to Tennessee after the War, Patterson became a lawyer and later a conservative Congressman. He soon met and married Josephine Rice. According to family lore, Josephine Rice was the daughter of a rich planter who gave fifteen slaves as a marriage dowry; Virginia learned in later life that the Rice "plantation" was little more than a two room brick house with a dogtrot. As a tribute to Patterson's service during the Civil War, he was made custodian of Shiloh Park. Thus, Virginia grew up hearing stories of her grandfather's heroism.⁴⁰ Durr recalled later that she "used to think it was strange that here was my grandfather who spent four years trying to overthrow the government by force, fought in the cavalry and he was honored and got elected to Congress and became a very honored man . . . the South is a peculiar place."⁴¹ Virginia's family heritage assured her a position in Alabama, as she was considered part of the old 'ruling class' of Southern gentility. Despite the reality of her family's heritage, Virginia, throughout her life, considered herself part of the ruling class of Southern whites. This upper-class sensibility remained an essential part of her self-identity.

³⁹W. Brewer, *Alabama: Her History, Resource, War Record, and Public Men, from 1540-1872* (first published in 1872, reprint Tuscaloosa, AL: Wills Publishing Co., 1964), 486.

⁴⁰Pauline Jones Gandrud, *Marriage, Death, and Legal Notices from Early Alabama Newspapers, 1819-1893* (Greenville, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1994), 83; Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 13; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 10-11.

⁴¹Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 16.

Virginia's parents met at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Her father, Sterling Johnson Foster, obtained an extensive education, studying theology at Southwestern, Hampden-Sydney, Princeton, and Edinburgh, Scotland, in addition to traveling to the Middle East. Foster's exposure had led him to question a literal interpretation of the Bible, a factor that would ultimately ruin his career as a pastor. Foster obtained a position as a pastor of a church in Memphis, where he met and married Anne Eliza Patterson. Not long after the marriage, the Fosters moved to Birmingham, where Sterling took a position as pastor of the South Highland Presbyterian Church. In a parsonage off of Highland Avenue the Foster's third child, Virginia, was born on August 6, 1903. Virginia claimed that she always felt she disappointed her father because she was not a boy and that her older sister Josephine was always his favorite.⁴² While Josephine was the "angel" of the family, Virginia was the "devil," headstrong and temperamental. Virginia felt that her father never really cared for her—she was "too much like him" and that "irritated him."⁴³

Established in 1871, Birmingham, Alabama, boomed during the early twentieth century with the introduction of coke pig iron production. Coal mines surrounded the city, and when the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company (TCI) expanded into Birmingham in 1886, the town became a center for steel production.⁴⁴ Although the industry brought great promise to the region, it became "the biggest disappointment of the New South."⁴⁵ When United States Steel purchased the TCI in 1907, it assured that

⁴² Durr, "Grace and Guts," 19.

⁴³ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 12-14, 52.

⁴⁴ Edward Shannon LaMonte, *Politics and Welfare in Birmingham, 1900-1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 3-4.

⁴⁵ Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), 165.

the control of the Birmingham steel production came from the northeast, while the TCI bought out the smaller local competition. Birmingham became, in essence, a “one-company town.”⁴⁶ Yet, from 1900-1917 “Birmingham stood as the preeminent example of industrialization in the New South.”⁴⁷ However, the iron industry in Alabama lagged behind the rest of the nation. Dependence on outside expertise, its need for outside capital, the neglect of the Southern steel industry by northern-based U.S. Steel, and the lack of a large Southern steel market retarded the growth and development of the iron and steel industry in Birmingham, as well as in other parts of the South. Furthermore, the labor force remained inexperienced and had a high turnover rate, one of many factors that retarded Southern industrial growth.⁴⁸

Historian Bobby M. Wilson has described Birmingham during the early twentieth century as “America’s Johannesburg”—a city built on segregation and cheap black labor. The unskilled labor force consisted primarily of African-American workers, who lived in cramped company housing and whose lives were closely monitored by the TCI. While blacks comprised 40 percent of Birmingham’s population, they made up over half of the work force in iron production. During the 1930s and 1940s, the work force became increasingly white, particularly in the skilled or semi-skilled occupations. Union activity was often met with hostility, and a bi-racial unionization did not make itself present until the 1950s.⁴⁹ The lack of unionization was due, in part, because of racial divisions, but also as a result of an inexperienced work force. Even as late as 1936, “southerners were

⁴⁶ Bobby M. Wilson, *America’s Johannesburg: Industrialization and Racial Transformation in Birmingham* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000): 185.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4; interview with Thrasher and Hall, 58-60.

⁴⁸ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 110-111; Wright, *Old South, New South*, 170.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *America’s Johannesburg*, 188-190; Judith Stein, “Southern Workers in National Unions: Birmingham Steelworkers, 1936-1951,” in Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth Century South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991): 184-186.

mainly first-generation steelworkers.”⁵⁰ As a result, Southern industrialists promoted their region as having an abundant, non-unionized, cheap labor force. During the national steel strike of 1919, Birmingham workers were not at the forefront.⁵¹

Yet, the world of labor and steel production were far removed from Virginia’s life. Most of Virginia’s childhood memories were idyllic. She described herself as “a very privileged child, brought up in a little cocoon of love and devotion and care.”⁵² One of the primary figures who nurtured Virginia during her childhood was a black servant, known to Virginia as “Nursie.” Like many white children, Virginia established a close relationship with her nurse, who served as her surrogate mother. Virginia considered Nursie’s daughter, Sarah, one of her closest friends.⁵³ In her youth, Virginia suffered a similar fate of many Southern white children who “had the experience of giving their first love to a black woman or a black man and then being taught little by little that it was a relationship they couldn’t have.”⁵⁴

Consequently, Virginia recognized at a young age that blacks and whites lived in different worlds, although for a time she felt that she belonged in both. It was not until her seventh birthday that the once fluid racial line closed behind her. That summer Virginia’s mother and grandmother decided that Virginia would forego the customary back-yard birthday party with the black children and have a front-yard party with white children. After Virginia threw a tantrum, her parents reached a compromise--there would be a barbeque in the morning and a ‘white’ party in the afternoon, thus effectively

⁵⁰ Ibid.,186.

⁵¹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 20; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 337.

⁵² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 14.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18.

segregating Virginia's birthday celebration. While at the party, Virginia threw a knife at her cousin for calling Sarah, Nursie's daughter, a "nigger." Consequently, Virginia's Aunt May blamed Nursie for Virginia's behavior. Invoking racial stereotypes of black women's sexuality, Aunt May argued that Nursie probably had venereal disease. "Nursie," realizing that Virginia's mother failed to defend her, left the next morning. Brokenhearted, Virginia never saw her nurse again.⁵⁵ It was a common experience for many white Southerners. According to historian Elizabeth Grace Hale, "with the end of childhood, whites learned the meaning of segregation. . . .to be a mature white Southerner meant to leave a love for and intimacy with African Americans behind."⁵⁶ In later years, Virginia claimed that her relationship with Mary McLeod Bethune served as a substitute for her lost nurse—"Mrs. Bethune translated into the black woman who looked after me and became my protector."⁵⁷

Along with Nursie, the women Virginia encountered in her childhood profoundly influenced her views on gender and race. Virginia's grandmother, Virginia Heard Foster, helped shape her ideas of female independence. In her grandmother, Virginia saw the quintessential Southern belle, a "queen bee" who "never had to do anything in her life but be charming. . . .she was really like a child."⁵⁸ "Miss Ginny," as she was known, lived on the Union Springs plantation, and Virginia's summer visits to the plantation were among some of her happiest childhood memories. Virginia thought that Miss Ginny "owned the town," and as one of the richest women in the region, most of the town bowed to her

⁵⁵ Durr, interview by Thrasher and Hall, 25-27, 31-32; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 16-17.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 117-118.

⁵⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 19.

⁵⁸ Durr, inter view by Thrasher and Hall, 4.

wishes.⁵⁹ Virginia recognized early the power that came with having money, and it served to increase Virginia's desire to "have everybody love me and everybody obligated to me."⁶⁰ While it was black women who, according to Virginia, raised, held, and comforted her during her childhood, she was also raised with a paternalistic view that she had a responsibility to African Americans.⁶¹ This paternalism characterized much of Virginia's struggle for black rights throughout her lifetime.

Despite Ginny's formidable presence, Virginia remembered that it was not Ginny who ran the plantation, but "Old Easter," an ex-slave who remained at Union Springs after the Civil War. Easter's word was law, and she assumed the charge of running the plantation and taking care of the children; in fact, Ginny frequently deferred to Easter's judgment. Both Easter and Grandmother Foster were powerful women in their own rite, and Easter's dignity and strength made it even more difficult for Virginia to accept the idea of black inferiority.⁶²

In an article published in 1971, Virginia Durr further reflected on other women she encountered in her childhood. She learned at an early age that the most dreaded person she could become was an "old maid." Her unmarried female relatives served to demonstrate to Virginia the sad state of an unmarried Southern woman. Virginia realized that "while romance was fine, it was having a man look after you and provide for you that was necessary and the lack of one was what made old maids such objects of pity, for the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Letters from Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Durr," *Alabama Journal*, ca 10 March 1954, Clifford J. Durr Papers, box 5, folder 8, Alabama State Department of Archives, Montgomery, Alabama (hereafter cited as CJD Papers).

⁶² Durr, interview by Thrasher and Hall, 4-5.

lack of a man meant a life of poverty as well as pity.”⁶³ Widows, moreover, had little future either, as they were trained to do nothing except be “ladies,” and, consequently, had no skills or resources.⁶⁴ Unmarried women, according to Virginia, could obtain a menial job, but they were primarily objects of pity, “just like Jane Austen.”⁶⁵

Virginia’s article recalls how she began to examine the women around her who successfully managed to keep a husband. Both her aunts and her mother, while held up as the role models, were entirely dependent upon their husbands. Nevertheless, as a young girl, the “belle” became the model to which Virginia aspired. Josephine, Virginia’s sister and local “belle,” was admired by everyone, even though “she never seemed to do anything or say anything, at least not much, simply smiled, looked beautiful and sweet and they all adored her.”⁶⁶ Virginia recalled being mesmerized by the belles in their beautiful clothes and surrounded by suitors—“the belles were so pretty that they looked just like animated flowers.”⁶⁷ She was drawn into, what she termed, the “cult of Pure, White, Southern Womanhood,” that protected Southern women against rape by black men and heralded their virtue as a major cause of the Civil War.⁶⁸ Virginia stated, “I got the feeling that the Civil War had been fought just for me, entirely in my behalf and I wept for the Lost Cause and waved my Stars and Bars.”⁶⁹ Not until after her own marriage and the onset of the Great Depression did Virginia begin to question the female roles that were modeled to her from childhood.

⁶³ Virginia Foster, “The Emancipation of Pure, White, Southern Womanhood,” *New South* (Winter: 1971): 47.

⁶⁴ Foster, “Emancipation,” 49.

⁶⁵ “Virginia Durr Delights Audience Recalling ‘Proper’ Girlhood in Five Points,” *The Birmingham News*, 26 March 1976, 19-20.

⁶⁶ Foster, “Emancipation,” 50.

⁶⁷ Nicholas Chriss, “Will the Real Southern Belle Stand Up?,” 13 December 1971, newspaper clipping, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 5.

⁶⁸ Foster, “Emancipation,” 51.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

The Fosters' social standing allowed for Virginia to claim a place in the "cult" of white southern womanhood. Although Virginia described her family's financial situation as "being in that awful in-between stage of being genteel but poor," the Fosters' family name and social status as a Presbyterian minister's family (although not as 'fashionable' as an Episcopalian) assured them a place in Birmingham society.⁷⁰ Despite Sterling Foster's extensive education, he maintained a paternalistic view of both race and gender. Virginia recalled that her mother assumed all of the household duties, and that her father assumed no responsibilities around the house. Watching her mother 'serve' her father had a major impact on the 'feminist' views that Virginia acquired in adulthood.⁷¹ She told a reporter in 1976 that she was never content to stay home "making cookies and cocoa."⁷² Durr wanted more than her mother, and she found her outlet in the social activism of the New Deal era.

It was while studying for a time at the University of Berlin that Sterling Foster concluded that the Bible was not literal truth. Thus, during his time in Birmingham, church members began to accuse Sterling of preaching heretical sermons. In order to keep his position as minister, church members proposed that Foster sign an oath stating that the Bible's version of Jonah and the whale was literal. Sterling declined, was declared a heretic, and thrown out of the church.⁷³ According to Virginia, "I swear to God that it was easier to be raised in Birmingham as a communist than as a heretic."⁷⁴ Circumstances forced Sterling Foster to take a job selling insurance. Not adept at

⁷⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷² "Work for Reform in World, Says Activist Virginia Durr," *Alabama Journal*, 6 April 1976, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 6.

⁷³ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 33-35.

⁷⁴ Durr, "Grace and Guts," 19.

business, Foster did not fare well and disliked having to sell insurance to blacks, which he felt was beneath him.⁷⁵

Although Virginia's father soon suffered a nervous breakdown, the family fortunes changed with the death of her grandmother. The Fosters inherited part of the plantation at Union Springs, giving the family an annual income. The Fosters built a house on Niazuma Avenue, bought a Packard, and joined the country club. Virginia's mother, Anna, whom Virginia viewed as "the most beautiful creature in the world," joined the Cadmean Circle, a fashionable social and literary club.⁷⁶ Although Virginia attended public schools, her close friends were those in her social group and neighborhood, and she quickly learned that the worst thing she could do was to be "common," a Southern synonym for vulgar.⁷⁷ The concept that Virginia belonged to the upper class of Birmingham society was ingrained in her consciousness; her identity was that of the ruling class, regardless of her family's financial situation. Yet, the plantation never prospered as the Fosters hoped, and Sterling constantly had to borrow money to supply seed for the tenants due to the unstable price of cotton. The cotton boom of the pre-World War I era had collapsed by 1914, plummeting many families, including the Fosters, into dire economic straits.⁷⁸ Virginia learned early that almost anything she did "was connected to the price of cotton."⁷⁹

In 1918, at the age of fifteen, Virginia got the opportunity to spend some time in New York City. "Aunt Mamie," a family friend, made her living by boarding young

⁷⁵ Durr, interview by Thrasher and Hall, 73.

⁷⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 22.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

⁷⁸ Tindall, *Emergence*, 33-35; Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 107.

⁷⁹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 36.

Southern girls at her New York house, under the guise of introducing them to New York society. Josephine had already spent time in New York, and Mamie convinced Anna Foster that the opportunity would be perfect for her youngest daughter, as Virginia was considered a tall, near-sighted young woman who talked too much. In order for her to make a suitable marriage, Mamie argued, Virginia had to get “polished.” While there, Virginia attended Miss Finch’s finishing school (which, she claims, was not as “fashionable” as Miss Spence’s school), where she learned academics and social graces, such as how to properly cross her legs, deal with servants, and pour tea.⁸⁰ Virginia’s academic work progressed, and her teachers described her as “intelligent,” but “loquacious” with a “very attractive personality,” but a “persistent dialect.”⁸¹

Virginia recognized that, under the guise of academic achievement and the mastery of social graces, the real purpose for her stay in New York was to find and marry a rich ‘Yankee’ husband. She faced one of many contradictions of her upbringing, for while she was taught to hate Yankees, her parents, like many upper-class Southern families, had a hope that their daughter would marry a wealthy northerner and “bring him home to save the South or the plantation.”⁸² Virginia also learned for the first time that her northern schoolmates regarded Southerners as poor, uneducated, and dirty.⁸³ This early education perhaps led Virginia to a paradoxical pride in and shame for her region, as well as a life-long need to defend it. As historian Gavin Wright argues, pride in one’s Southern heritage was generally “higher among highly educated Southerners who have

⁸⁰ Ibid., 29-33.

⁸¹ Grade Report, 13 May 1919, box 1, folder 1, Virginia Foster Durr Papers, Alabama State Department of Archives, Montgomery, Alabama (hereafter cited as VFD Papers).

⁸² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 30-31.

⁸³ Ibid., 37.

traveled or lived outside the region than it is among the poorly educated who have never left the South.”⁸⁴

Virginia had few northern beaux during her year in New York, and she felt Aunt Mamie gave her up as a lost cause. Throughout her reminiscences, Virginia reflects that she always felt inferior to her sister and to the other belles she knew. She claims she was too loud, too aggressive, and unattractive. Durr felt as though she never quite belonged to the society to which she was being groomed, but functioned as an outsider trying to play the part. Virginia had not yet begun to question her role or the racism and poverty that surrounded her.⁸⁵ Yet, this inability to completely conform to her prescribed gender and social roles perhaps opened the way for her to later question the social mores and customs of the South.

In 1921, the Fosters managed to obtain enough money to send Virginia to the Cathedral School in Washington, D.C. She had always enjoyed education, and the school only served to further her interest in academics. Yet, she felt that going to college was not her fate, for “young ladies went to finishing school, not to college. Only bluestocking intellectuals went to college.”⁸⁶ While Virginia earnestly sought an education, she also realized that her future was that of marriage and society. She had no intent, at her young age, to deviate from the norm. After only one year, Virginia returned home, however, for Josephine had become engaged to a man who would, in later years, alter the course of Virginia’s life.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Wright, *Old South, New South*, 8.

⁸⁵ *Outside the Magic Circle*, 38, 30-34.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

Hugo LaFayette Black was born in 1886 in Clay County, Alabama, from humble origins. A high school drop-out, Black later went on to study law at the University of Alabama. He established a successful law practice in Birmingham where he met Josephine Foster, who was wearing her striking Navy Yeomanette uniform, at a Southern Club dance around 1920. Entranced by both Josephine's beauty and her social standing, Black ardently pursued her. On February 23, 1921, Hugo and Josephine married in a small service in Josephine's home, as the Fosters could not afford an elaborate wedding. Although the Durrs felt Hugo married above his station, a successful marriage was necessary for his political aspirations.⁸⁸

Hugo Black had a profound influence on Virginia. Black's childhood in Clay County, a section wracked by poverty, made him a champion of the downtrodden throughout his career.⁸⁹ He had made a name for himself by enforcing prohibition laws and defending the rights of workers, both black and white. His reputation led Sterling Foster to refer to Black as the "young Bolshevik."⁹⁰ Hugo's "radical" stand for labor unions caused tension in the Foster household. Sterling Foster Jr., Virginia and Josephine's brother, felt that his mother was less than pleased about the marriage. A month before the wedding, Sterling knew nothing of the engagement, nor did he know the name of her intended.⁹¹ Yet, Virginia "adored" Hugo. Black introduced her to new ideas, brought her books by Charles and Mary Beard and Vernon Parrington and talked to

⁸⁸ Roger K. Newman, *Hugo Black: A Biography*, 2d ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 3; 16-37; 52-53.

⁸⁹ "The Legacy of Hugo Black," *Alabama Journal*, 20 September 1971, VFD Papers, Box 3, folder 5, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁹⁰ Newman, *Hugo Black*, 38-50; 52.

⁹¹ Sterling Foster to Virginia Foster, 21 January 1921, VFD Papers, box 1 folder 1, Montgomery, Alabama.

her “as an equal.”⁹² For the first time, Virginia was introduced to the world of organized labor and the downtrodden.

While Hugo Black’s biographer claims that Josephine asserted her independence and made a “subtle rebellion” by marrying Black, Virginia did not see that side of “Sister”.⁹³ Although Josephine attended Sweet Briar College and joined the Navy Yeomanettes, any independence that she might have asserted ceased with her marriage to Black. While Hugo adored Josephine, Virginia claimed that Sister’s identity was absorbed in her husband’s—“she was Mrs. Hugo Black. He expected her to subordinate herself to his life and his ambitions. It never occurred to him otherwise.”⁹⁴ By witnessing the effect that Josephine’s marriage, Virginia began to desire a modicum of self-independence. Virginia’s youth was a paradox; while she wished to be popular with boys and make a successful marriage, she also wanted an education. When the chance to attend college came her way, Virginia embraced the opportunity.

In 1921 Virginia enrolled in Wellesley College, just outside of Boston. The \$1,500 tuition was a stretch for the Fosters, but Anna Foster convinced her husband that Virginia might be able to meet and marry a rich man there.⁹⁵ Regardless of her parents’ intent, Virginia, armed with a new squirrel coat and some ball dresses, was thrilled to get a chance at a college education. At Wellesley she made fast friends with her roommate, Emmie Bosley, whose parents’ financial situation was similar to Virginia’s. Both girls struggled to belong to the upper-class society in which they socialized.⁹⁶

⁹² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 41.

⁹³ Newman, *Hugo Black*, 51.

⁹⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 47.

⁹⁵ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 101; Durr *Outside the Magic Circle*, 51. Virginia always suspected that Hugo Black may have helped with the tuition fees, as he was already helping the Foster family financially.

⁹⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 51-52.

Virginia later claimed that her time at Wellesley was one of the happiest in her life. She felt “completely free,” far from the prying eyes of Birmingham society that constantly watched their daughters to see how popular they were with the boys.⁹⁷ Virginia compared the dating scene in Birmingham to “a horse race” in which mothers competed to see “whether your daughter was coming out ahead and who danced with her.”⁹⁸ Marriage, Virginia recalled, was serious business. Her first month at Wellesley, Virginia received an invitation to the Southern Club in Cambridge. The Southern Club provided a social outlet for young Southerners who were attending northern universities to meet and dance, for a nominal fee. Through a mutual acquaintance, a young Southerner attending Harvard named Clark Foreman was introduced to Virginia and invited her to the Southern Club. Although Virginia and Clark Foreman never became romantically involved, their acquaintance sparked a friendship that lasted for the remainder of their lives. Carefully chaperoned, the Southern Club dances were exciting to Virginia and gave her a taste of freedom and independence. Virginia recalled that one of the most “daring” things that happened at the Southern Club dances was that girls would sometimes break-in to dance with a boy.⁹⁹ One of the boys that Virginia broke-in on was Bill Winston, a tall, handsome Harvard student whom Virginia described as “the most thrilling figure of romance” she had ever seen.¹⁰⁰ Although the romance with Winston amounted to little, Virginia cherished her memories at the Southern Club and through it became introduced to Cambridge society.¹⁰¹ It would not be the last time in Virginia’s

⁹⁷ Ibid, 51.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 54-55.

¹⁰⁰ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 112.

¹⁰¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 55.

life that a group of Southerners, meeting in an alien land, would influence her life and outlook.

While Virginia loved her first year at Wellesley, she met one of the first challenges to her values and upbringing at the beginning of her sophomore year. Upon entering the dormitory dining room one day, she found an African American student eating at her assigned table. Knowing that her father would “have a fit” if she dined with a black girl, Virginia promptly got up and walked out. After trying to explain to the headmistress why she left, Virginia was informed that she could either dine with the young lady or withdraw from Wellesley.¹⁰² Virginia recalled that “this was the first time my values had been challenged. The things that I had been brought up with, nobody had ever challenged them before.”¹⁰³ Virginia decided to stay on at Wellesley and eat dinner with the student; however, there was no driving principle to her decision—she simply decided that if her father did not know, no one would tell him. None of the Southern students discussed the breaking of their taboos, even when they used the same swimming pool as black students. Virginia recalled that none of them wanted to challenge their upbringing, but none of the Southern students wanted to leave college either. They chose, instead, to ignore the issue and not discuss it.¹⁰⁴ Although Virginia’s racial views were not revolutionized at the time, Virginia recalls her experiences at Wellesley as giving her “a doubt. . . It hurt my faith, or my solid conviction, what I had been raised to believe.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid., 56-57.

¹⁰³ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 117.

¹⁰⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 59.

“Laura May Meets the USA,” a short story Virginia wrote years after her time at Wellesley, recounts the incident in the school cafeteria. The excitement of Laura May to attend Wellesley is apparent in the first few pages, as she embarks on the “wonderful world” opened for her.¹⁰⁶ Yet, when she comes to dine and a young black girl sits down, Laura May is faced with a decision. Durr writes,

Laura May sat silent, she was simply overcome. . . .She could hear her Father’s voice, “My God Almighty, if I had known you were going to have to eat with ‘Niggers’ I certainly wouldn’t have let you go there.”This was “social equality” and suppose the people in Sparta ever heard about it. . . .She got up hurriedly and went out to the surprised comments of her table mates, “What’s the matter, you sick?” and the soft comment of the Negro girl, “Reckon I’m too much for her.”¹⁰⁷

It was an experience Virginia alluded to often in her life as the beginning of her racial consciousness. Yet, the experience at Wellesley did not lead to an immediate change in her feelings towards the South. Instead, it reinforced what she was already coming to realize—the South and its customs were different. In the story, Laura May is shamed by the other girls at Wellesley because of her rudeness towards the black girl. She struggles with what troubles her most, being considered rude or going back on Southern tradition.¹⁰⁸

While Wellesley may not have revolutionized Virginia’s attitudes on race, it did give her another kind of education. For the first time, Virginia realized that women could

¹⁰⁶ Virginia Foster Durr, “Laura May Meets the USA,” draft of short story, Virginia Foster Durr Papers, Schlesinger Library, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts [hereafter, VFD Schlesinger Papers], box 1, folder 66.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 5-9.

obtain an education and live independently. Marriage was unnecessary for a happy life, Virginia concluded.¹⁰⁹ Virginia learned to use her “mind,” and to get “pleasure out of it.”¹¹⁰ Yet the development of Virginia’s intellect was not welcomed by most of her Southern contemporaries. A well-educated Southern woman ran the risk of losing her femininity. As Margaret Ripley Wolfe has argued, independent, educated women were often accused of “desexing” or “unsexing” themselves.¹¹¹

As the school term ended Virginia’s sophomore year, she was called home to Alabama. Her parents could no longer afford Wellesley. Although Virginia was offered a chance to work the next term in the “Self-Help House,” where students worked in order to pay for tuition, her father adamantly opposed the idea. Foster refused to allow his daughter to obtain financial help from anyone. Thus, after having completed two years at Wellesley, Virginia returned to Alabama.¹¹² As her future husband Clifford Durr explained, “the boll weevil ate up her education.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ *Outside the Magic Circle*, 63.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Margaret Ripley Wolfe, *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 159.

¹¹² Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 131-32.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

CHAPTER II

MARRIAGE AND DEPRESSION

The stock market crash of 1929 marked a profound change in American life. Gone was the glorification of big business that dominated the 1920s, only to be replaced by unemployment, poverty, and widespread disaffection with the Republican leadership of the decade. Although she set herself on the path to living in proper Birmingham society, the Great Depression also changed the course of Virginia Durr's life. Like many Americans, Durr could not return to life as it was during the pre-depression days once she left Alabama in the early 1930s.

Upon returning to Birmingham, Virginia's parents planned her 'debut.' During the summer of 1923 the Durrs took their daughter on rounds of parties and dances, introducing her to society and hoping for a suitable marriage proposal. Virginia also spent some time in Memphis with her aunt attending dances and parties. It was during her trip to Memphis that Virginia recalled a terrifying experience in which she was parked with a young man on a lover's lane when two African-American men, armed with a gun and a knife, came up to the car and demanded their money. While the young man stayed calm and gave them what he had, the incident terrified Virginia. She returned

home with nightmares and claimed that it was the first time in her life that she had found a black person threatening.¹¹⁴

After a year of parties and dances, Virginia received no marriage proposal that appealed to her. Instead, she decided to get a job at the county bar association's library. The decision had less to do with a desire for independence than it did with her family's financial hardship. With her earnings, Virginia got the leaky plumbing fixed, the broken furnace repaired, and the old roof replaced in the family's house. Embarrassed that Virginia was working and helping the family, her parents told friends that the money was for new shoes and ball dresses. Upon the death of the law librarian, Virginia got the position, paying one hundred and fifty dollars a month.¹¹⁵

At the age of twenty one, Virginia remained single, and her family feared she would become an 'old maid'. Most of Virginia's friends were getting married, and her future husband claimed that her family had all but given up on her.¹¹⁶ While Virginia had some suitors, including two at Wellesley, none were viable husbands, until one Sunday at church, Virginia set eyes on a tall, blond, "handsome" young man who "wore English suits, not the seersucker suits that looked like pajamas."¹¹⁷ She discovered his name was Clifford Durr, and that their fathers had known each other for some time. As a fraternity brother of Sterling Jr.'s, the family invited Clifford to lunch the next Sunday, and a courtship began.¹¹⁸

Clifford Judkins Durr was born in March of 1899 in Montgomery, Alabama. His father, John, established the respectable Durr Drug Company in 1906, and, unlike

¹¹⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 63-65.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹⁶ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 145.

¹¹⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 67.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

Virginia, Cliff grew up in an upper middle-class lifestyle. The youngest of five children, Cliff had a close family and a deep love for his mother.¹¹⁹ In fact, the description he gave of her, as “little, pretty, flirtatious, imaginative—and tough” could also fit Virginia.¹²⁰ Like Virginia, some of Cliff’s happiest childhood memories were spent in the country, at the family farm near Wetumpka, and he had a close, loving relationship with his nurse, Henrietta Walker. Yet, his paternalistic views on race were not challenged in his youth. After studying law at the University of Alabama, Cliff applied for, and won, a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University in 1919.¹²¹

Cliff spent two years at Oxford, an experience that not only opened his eyes to the world outside of Alabama, but also served to reinforce his pride in his heritage and region.¹²² Durr’s biographer, John A. Salmond, describes Cliff as “always a Southerner, and throughout his long life he loved his region. . . . it was the very wellspring of his existence.”¹²³ Upon returning to the United States, Cliff took a legal position in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he practiced law for only a year. He not only missed Alabama, Cliff was also trying to find a wife. Reserved and quiet, Cliff was having little luck with the women in Milwaukee. He returned to Alabama and took a job with the Alabama Power Company in Birmingham.¹²⁴

It was while living in Birmingham that Cliff met Virginia. According to Virginia, Cliff’s proposal was prompted by a kiss. After Cliff kissed Virginia one night in his

¹¹⁹ John A. Salmond, *The Conscience of a Lawyer: Clifford J. Durr and American Civil Liberties, 1899-1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 1-3.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 2-5, 11-18; “Clifford Durr is Given Scholarship to Oxford College,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 3 November 1919, Durr Family Papers [hereafter cited as DFP], box 6, folder 3, Alabama State Department of Archives, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²² Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 23.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹²⁴ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 34-37.

father's garage, she assumed they would be married. She recalled she "didn't know what the consequences of this kissing would be! And so we got engaged."¹²⁵ Like many girls of her generation, Virginia had little knowledge about sex. Virginia was sexually inexperienced when she married Cliff, despite her claim of having had a "passionate love affair" with a boy when she was twelve, although they never engaged in sexual intercourse. Virginia considered herself a "nice" girl, who would engage in kissing and flirting, getting men "excited" but stopping there.¹²⁶ She claimed that "we had no idea of [men's] feelings at all—no consideration for them. We just expected to be loved for ourselves, but we had no idea of their needs."¹²⁷ Despite her insufficient sex education, Virginia always enjoyed lovemaking and never suffered from "being frustrated."¹²⁸

Clifford Durr and Virginia Foster married on April 6, 1926. It was a large society wedding, perhaps paid for by the selling of plantation land in Union Springs. Virginia's family felt she had married well, and the match justified sending out 1500 invitations and providing Virginia with no less than eight bridesmaids.¹²⁹ It was money her family did not have, but Virginia celebrated in style. The Durrs were also pleased with the match. Lucy Durr, described as "not at all easily pleased," especially concerning matters about her "baby chile," found Virginia quite acceptable, and sent a glowing letter to her future daughter-in-law, describing Virginia as "lovely"—a true compliment by Southern standards.¹³⁰ The Foster-Durr wedding received considerable write-up in the Birmingham papers. The wedding was considered "of great interest" to locals, as the

¹²⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 69.

¹²⁶ Virginia Foster Durr, interview with Marie Jemison, MJ Papers, box 4, folder 15.4.1, 5-6.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²⁹ Unknown author to Virginia Durr, 26 November 1925, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 1.

¹³⁰ Lucy Durr to Virginia Foster, 21 November 1925, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 1; Lucy Durr to Virginia Foster Durr, 24 April, 1923, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 1.

family of the groom “has long been prominent.”¹³¹ Of Virginia, reporters claimed that “no young woman in society has been more generally admired than has Miss Foster,” who “possesses that marvelous attribute—a lovely speaking voice.”¹³² Seemingly celebrated by all, the union of Cliff and Virginia would grow stronger throughout their lives of struggle and confrontation.

After a honeymoon on the Gulf Coast, in which they weathered a minor hurricane, Virginia and Cliff returned to Birmingham and lived in the Fosters’ home. Virginia’s parents were struggling financially and hoped that Cliff would bring in a little income. Virginia settled into married life content and pregnant with their first child. Virginia adored being pregnant, primarily because of the lavish attention she received.¹³³ She said “I felt like a queen bee. I felt as though I was doing something that nobody had ever done before.”¹³⁴ Aided by a private nurse that stayed on for almost a month after delivery, Virginia gave birth to Ann Patterson Durr in 1927, and the Durrs began searching for a home of their own. When Virginia and Cliff moved out of the Foster home, Hugo and Josephine Black moved in. Hugo had returned to Alabama for the Senatorial election of 1932, and, to save the Fosters’ pride, claimed that the Fosters would be helping the Blacks out by allowing them to reside in their home.¹³⁵ Both sons-in-law felt financially responsible for the Fosters and aided financially when possible.

Following a bad miscarriage, Virginia and Cliff finally found a house of their own. Virginia joined the Junior League and a bridge club, and began to live the “life of a

¹³¹ “Wedding Ceremony of Miss Foster and Mr. Durr,” *Birmingham Age Herald*, 6 April 1926, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 4.

¹³² “Easter Nuptials of Miss Foster,” n.d., VFD Papers, box 3, folder 6.

¹³³ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 152-153.

¹³⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 73-74.

¹³⁵ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 155-157; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 74;

young married woman in Birmingham.”¹³⁶ Although they lived comfortably, despite the aid they gave her parents, Virginia started to be aware of the terrible conditions that surrounded her after the stock market crashed in October of 1929. People were losing jobs, as the smelting plants shut down. She recalled “more and more beggars came to the door. . . . you didn’t want to go from your door to the garage, because people were lurking in the alley.”¹³⁷ Virginia was strongly affected by the poverty around her. She began reading political and economic theories, discussing radical ideas with Cliff. They both began to question the current political and social system, which allowed such suffering to occur.¹³⁸

When the Great Depression plunged the United States into an almost decade-long economic depression, the South was one of the hardest-hit regions in the country. As John Egerton aptly states, “when America caught cold, the South got pneumonia, and when the nation was really sick, as it was in the Great Depression, its colonial states below the Mason-Dixon Line were on their deathbed.”¹³⁹ The economic depression that began nation-wide in 1929 only increased the agricultural depression that had gripped the South during the decade of the 1920s. Southern cotton production suffered further with the onset of depression, as cotton prices declined to 4.6 cents a bale in 1932, the lowest price since 1894. Southern industry was also hard hit. In Birmingham, the city Franklin Delano Roosevelt claimed was the worst hit during the Depression, the average wage declined from twenty-eight dollars a week in 1927 to seventeen dollars a week by 1932. Black employment, a large bulk of the steel industry work force, declined by 30 percent

¹³⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 74.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ John Salmond, interview with Virginia Durr, quoted in Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 43.

¹³⁹ Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day*, 15.

during the Depression, as the jobs first went to white workers. During the depression years, Birmingham manufacturing decreased by 70 percent. In July of 1933, there were more than 33,000 cases of workers who were seeking relief in the city.¹⁴⁰

The Depression forced the South to face the economic reality of the region and its inability to abandon its dependence on cotton production. Ralph McGill, in his essay “What the Depression Taught Us,” argues that, due to the Great Depression,

Gone, finally, were the myths of white-pillared mansions and a magnolia-scented civilization. There were days. . .when it seemed as if distorting veils had been removed and we could, for the first time, see the cotton South plain.¹⁴¹

The poverty and suffering of the South forced many people to “look beyond the veneer of intellectual and cultural destitution and consider the human face” behind the poverty and consider methods for the region’s recovery.¹⁴² During the Depression, the South became a focus of national concern for many Americans. It also transformed some Southerners, as they became aware of the misery and poverty of others. Virginia Durr was one Southerner who developed an awareness of the destitution that surrounded her. In 1970, Virginia reflected,

Up to this time [the Depression], I had been a conformist, a Southern snob. I actually thought the only people who amounted to anything were the very small group which I belonged to. . . .I was vice-president of the Junior League [that] made me value even more the idea of being well-

¹⁴⁰ Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 354; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 21; Wilson, *America’s Johannesburg*, 199.

¹⁴¹ McGill, *The South and the Southerner*, 159-160.

¹⁴² Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 2.

born. What I learned during the Depression changed all that. I saw a blinding light like Saul on the road to DamascusI saw the world as it really was.¹⁴³

For many in the South, like Durr, the Depression brought to the forefront the economic and social disparity of the region and prompted a fervent desire to address and solve the problems.

After an almost deadly miscarriage in 1931, Virginia began to turn her attention to the plight of the poor in Birmingham. In the hospital, Virginia saw children suffering from rickets and malnutrition. The dairy companies raised the price of milk in an attempt to stay in business and poured unsold milk down gutters. Consequently, many people were unable to afford milk for their children. Thus, Virginia decided to organize a milk project for the Junior League. The group convinced the dairies to give the surplus milk to the Red Cross for use at its feeding stations.¹⁴⁴ Virginia also persuaded the Alabama Dairy and Food Council to match a fifty dollar donation by the Junior League for the project, and she was congratulated for her efforts to get the milk plants to agree to such a “worthy cause.”¹⁴⁵ The milk drive was Virginia’s first foray into social activism.

Virginia’s work with the milk project and the Red Cross made her, for probably the first time, socially aware. She not only became aware of the abject poverty of children, but of how that poverty affected women. While in the hospital after her miscarriage, she met a woman who had just put her child up for adoption. The unmarried woman came from Chicago and had moved to Birmingham to have her baby, away from

¹⁴³ Studs Terkel, ed., *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 528.

¹⁴⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 76-77.

¹⁴⁵ Helen Greene to Virginia Durr, 1 April 1932, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 2.

the scrutiny of her family and friends. The woman did not know who the father was, as she was often called on at her job at a department store to “entertain” male clients. While Virginia thought the situation was terrible, the woman looked very calm and told Virginia that she had to make a living somehow.¹⁴⁶ Virginia stated “I became aware of how badly women could be treated and how helpless they were in situations like that. I think that was the first dawn of a feeling of wrath and rage against women’s lot.”¹⁴⁷

Virginia also organized a concert for the families who were poor. She felt that if they had some kind of recreation, they would feel better about life. She contacted the local fire station and got the fireman’s band to agree to play at a free concert. The local policeman’s band played as well. The concert was well attended and became an ongoing event on Sundays. Durr’s social conscience had yet to develop, as free concerts did little to alleviate the underlying problems of Southern society. Yet, while visiting the steel towns, such as Gate City and Ensley, Virginia became angry at the treatment of the workers. While the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company allowed workers to remain in their homes, the company cut off the utilities. Republic Steel drove the workers out of their homes, and Virginia remembered many families living in coke ovens.¹⁴⁸

What shocked Durr, perhaps even more than the destitution, was the people’s attitudes toward their impoverishment. Most of the people, including her parents, blamed themselves. The Fosters lost everything and eventually sold the plantation to the Maytag Company for eight dollars an acre. Her mother’s mental health collapsed as a result, as she felt helpless and ashamed for having to depend on her sons-in-laws for survival. Yet,

¹⁴⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 75-76.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 76

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; Durr, interview by Thrasher and Hall, part II, 3.

there was no anger among the people she met. They felt that if they had saved more money, or hadn't bought a new car, they would have been able to survive. What enraged Virginia even more were the ministers who were telling the people that they had sinned and that was the reason for their suffering.¹⁴⁹ Virginia recalled "I got so that I wanted to kill these preachers."¹⁵⁰ As a Presbyterian, Virginia had grown up to believe that God ordained one's lifestyle, wealth, and character—it was "in the blood," as she described it.¹⁵¹ Yet, Durr began to question this theology as she came in constant contact with suffering and poverty. The Great Depression not only altered her view of religion, it challenged her assumptions about society and the economy. In fact, human dignity, more than any religious theology, drove her years of activism.

Another problem Virginia realized was the lack of adequate aid for the poor. After Birmingham abandoned its Department of Public Welfare in 1929, local relief became the responsibility of volunteer agencies, such as the Red Cross, the League of Women Voters, and the Salvation Army, none of whom were adequately funded for the job. Red Cross estimates during the Depression cited almost 11,000 men and women who needed jobs and between 6,000-8,000 people who lacked adequate food, housing, and fuel in Birmingham alone. In 1932, Congressman George Huddleston testified before a United States Senate relief committee that the people in Birmingham were desperate and starving, and that tensions within the city were building. In order to receive aid from local agencies, such as the Red Cross, families had to register with the Social Service Exchange to qualify, leaving a good many, especially African Americans, out of the system of local relief. From the Red Cross, qualifying families received a little over

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 8; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 78-79.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵¹ Durr, interview by Thrasher and Hall, 57.

two dollars a week for a family of five.¹⁵² The agency also suffered from lack of funding, and many of the workers did not have cars to travel to some of the worst areas in Birmingham, primarily in the suburbs of Ensley and West End. Therefore, Virginia and some of the Junior League members formed a car pool and drove Red Cross workers to the homes of the poor, where there was no electricity, water or heat.¹⁵³ Virginia remembered, “I saw more accumulated misery than you can imagine. . . .I thought I couldn’t stand it. It was too much. I couldn’t bear to hear another complaint.”¹⁵⁴ Virginia did not turn away from the suffering, however; her experiences in Birmingham during the early years of the Depression marked a profound change. She found she could no longer return to the socially blind housewife and that the society to which she belonged covered a harsh reality of poverty and injustice.

By 1933, Virginia’s parents rented their house and moved in with the Durrs. Anna Foster began to suffer from severe depression and was institutionalized. Virginia recalls the time as a terrible period. But her father began working for the Roosevelt campaign and got a job in the National Emergency Council. Cliff, however, soon lost his job as legal council for the Alabama Power Company. As full partner, Cliff protested the firing of stenographers and young lawyers. Virginia felt that Cliff’s position became precarious because of his relationship to Hugo Black. According to Virginia’s account, Logan Martin, who was one of the top members of the firm, did not like Black and,

¹⁵² LaMonte, *Politics and Welfare*, 90-92, 95; Virginia Foster Durr, interview by Linda Reed, 29 December 1982, transcript. Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory, Bloomington, IN, 23.

¹⁵³ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 78-79.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

therefore, Cliff. Whether Cliff was fired or resigned is unsure, but Cliff found himself trying to open a private law firm in the midst of the Depression.¹⁵⁵

In between jobs, Cliff took his family to their fishing cabin near Clanton. Once again, Virginia was confronted with the abject poverty of the people who had made their “Hooverilles” along the river banks. Finding some sugar and chocolate, Virginia made the poverty-stricken children some fudge. It was during this trip that Cliff was summoned to take a phone call in Clanton. On the phone was his brother-in-law, Hugo Black, informing Cliff that the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) needed corporate lawyers and asking if he would be willing to interview.

While Cliff voted for Roosevelt and was a staunch Democrat (“not an Alexander Hamilton Democrat or a States Rights Democrat, a Hoovercrat, a Dixiecrat, a Republicrat, or even an Alabama Democrat. . . just a Democrat—period”), he did not have aspirations of becoming directly involved in the New Deal.¹⁵⁶ In need of a job, and intrigued by the offer, Cliff promptly traveled to Washington, D.C. Black assured Durr that he was referred solely on his qualifications and experience in corporate law.¹⁵⁷ Cliff took an interview with the RFC’s chief counsel, Stanley Reed, who offered Durr a job heading the bank insurance program in the RFC. Durr felt that a good deal of his appointment came from the fact that he was from Alabama. President Roosevelt was not satisfied with Cliff’s predecessor, a close associate of Senator Lister Hill, and chose not

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁵⁶ Clifford Durr, “Unpublished Autobiography,” CJD Papers, box 18, folder 3; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 44.

¹⁵⁷ Clifford Durr to Virginia Durr, 29 April 1933, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 2.

to reappoint him. Therefore, to prevent alienating Hill, Reed offered the job to Cliff, who had grown up with Lister Hill in Alabama.¹⁵⁸

Cliff was eager to start work and felt that the job would fit his personality and interest. Although Cliff described Virginia as a “pecan tree,” who was not eager to be transplanted, he felt that the roots were “already loosened some.”¹⁵⁹ Remaining in Washington to begin work, Cliff urged Virginia to hurry and bring Ann with her to join him.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, in the early summer of 1933, Virginia found herself and her family leaving Alabama for the center of government and the seat of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s experimental New Deal.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Clifford J. Durr, “Unpublished Autobiography,” CJD Papers, box 17, folder 5.

¹⁵⁹ Durr to Durr, 29 April 1933.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 45; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 83-86.

CHAPTER III

POLITICAL INITIATION

When Roosevelt entered office in 1932, he brought with him a sense of optimism, a sense of change in the midst of economic hardship. Historian William Leuchtenburg characterizes Roosevelt's ascension to office by stating, "Roosevelt had nonetheless made his greatest single contribution to the politics of the 1930s: the instillation of hope and courage in the people."¹⁶² During his first 'hundred days' the country witnessed a flurry of legislation attempting to combat the problems wrought by the Depression. Yet, "there was little ideological coherence in the New Deal. Roosevelt had a flypaper mind that could assimilate contradictory ideas in a way that was logically inconsistent but politically feasible."¹⁶³ Central to the New Deal's success was not only Roosevelt's dynamic personality and confidence, but also the people who supported and ran the agencies, for the New Deal "was a composite of FDR and the forces he unleashed."¹⁶⁴ Young New Dealers flocked to Washington and "imparted an enormous energy to the business of governing and impressed almost everyone with their contagious high spirits

¹⁶²William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 42.

¹⁶³ Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 6.

¹⁶⁴ Wayne J. Flynt, "The New Deal and Southern Labor," in *The New Deal and the South*, eds. James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namarato (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984), 65-65.

and dedication.”¹⁶⁵ The New Deal seemed to embrace many groups who were marginalized from American society—in particular labor, women, and African Americans. While Roosevelt’s term issued little legislation that dramatically altered life for women or minorities, as Harvard Sitkoff argues, it provided a ‘reform atmosphere,’ in which future change seemed possible.¹⁶⁶

Another group of Americans, who saw their region and lives wrecked by the Depression, were Southerners. They too, saw the election of Roosevelt as an impetus for change. According to Patricia Sullivan,

The young New Dealers embraced Roosevelt’s experimenting, forward-looking vision, which elevated the federal government to a leading role in securing the economic welfare of the nation. Viewing their region from a national perspective, Southerners were particularly sensitive to its unique problems and to the critical role of government in advancing the South’s economic and political modernization.¹⁶⁷

A core group of Southerners, who embraced the New Deal, saw in the atmosphere, and themselves, the ability to alter the South. If their initial goal was not to end the New South system of segregation, by the time of Roosevelt’s death they had emerged as some of the most virulent critics of Southern society and racism. Yet, it was the hope for federal intervention, and the restructuring of a failing economic system that initially drew many Southerners into Washington D.C. after 1933. The Durrs were among those Southerners who came to the capitol during the early part of the New Deal. The period in

¹⁶⁵ Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 63.

¹⁶⁶ Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁶⁷ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 4.

Washington D.C. marked a major transition for Virginia Durr, bringing her into a circle of social activism and reform unknown in Alabama.

One of Roosevelt's first reform efforts centered on the banking structure, and the "new weapon against the depression" was the Reconstruction Finance Corporation.¹⁶⁸ The Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) began under Herbert Hoover in 1932 as an instrument to make loans to commercial banks, credit unions, mortgage companies, savings and loans, and other institutions in an attempt to provide Americans with more confidence in the banking system. Under Hoover's administration, the RFC had an initial capital of \$500 million, with the ability to raise more than \$1.5 billion. Yet, by the time Hoover left office, the RFC had not solved the banking problems, and banks continued to close. Roosevelt embraced the RFC, but greatly expanded its powers with the Emergency Banking Act in 1933. Roosevelt made the RFC the central funding agency in the New Deal, providing funding for the Farm Credit Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Home Owner's Loan Corporation, the Federal Housing Administration, among others, and the corporation was charged with purchasing private bank stock.¹⁶⁹ To effectively run the RFC, Roosevelt needed corporate lawyers, and, on that basis, Hugo Black suggested Clifford Durr.

Stanley Reed, the General Counsel for the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), interviewed Durr for the position of heading the recapitalization of the banks. While awaiting the board's decision, Cliff's primary concern was that his appointment came through an act of nepotism. Black assured Cliff that his recommendation was

¹⁶⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1956), 236.

¹⁶⁹ Donald R. Whitnah, ed. *Government Agencies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 462-466. For a more in-depth examination of the origins of the RFC, see James Olson Stuart, *Herbert Hoover and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, 1931-1933* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977).

based solely on Cliff's qualifications, and that, if Cliff failed, it would cause Hugo no embarrassment.¹⁷⁰ Although Cliff knew little about banking, he eagerly took the job. Cliff's role in the RFC was neither visible nor controversial. As Cliff's biographer has pointed out, "there was little that was ideological or politically divisive about the purchase of preferred stock in private banks."¹⁷¹ Still, Cliff enjoyed his job and found the work challenging, if not exhausting.

Both Cliff and Virginia expressed reservations about moving to Washington. Yet, Cliff knew Virginia was not entirely happy in Alabama. The suffering surrounding them, and the lack of lucrative job opportunities, helped ease the transition. Cliff assured Virginia that the pay was comfortable, and the Blacks opened their home to them until the Durrs got settled. Cliff also suggested Virginia bring her own servants, as help in Washington was both expensive and hard to get. He asked Virginia to keep his new position quiet for a time, as he did not want Hugo bombarded with requests to find acquaintances jobs. With Cliff already settled in Washington, Virginia had to move herself and her family to D.C. on her own.¹⁷²

Before moving to Washington D.C., Virginia attended a Junior League convention in Philadelphia. For the first time, she began to hear criticisms of the Roosevelts. Women argued that the socially and economically prominent Roosevelts did not need to champion the causes of "improvident" people who had failed to keep themselves out of bankruptcy.¹⁷³ The criticisms did not deter Virginia, who readily joined her husband and soon became fascinated by the fast-paced world of Washington

¹⁷⁰ Durr to Durr, 29 April 1933.

¹⁷¹ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 50.

¹⁷² Durr to Durr, 29 April 1933; Clifford Durr to Virginia Durr, 4 May 1933, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 2.

¹⁷³ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 89.

politics and the charisma of the Roosevelts. Virginia realized, however, the harsh criticisms people who advocated for change could face.

After living in a small apartment for a time, Cliff and Virginia found a farm house on Seminary Hill, home to the Virginia Episcopal Theological Seminary. Virginia had brought her servants with her during the move.¹⁷⁴ She recalled that “I still thought I could never get along without servants. . . .I paid the going wage, it never occurred to me to do otherwise.”¹⁷⁵ Despite their meager pay, Virginia felt that her servants were just happy to have work. Living on Seminary Hill, Virginia found herself among the most “conservative genteel community in northern Virginia.”¹⁷⁶ Seminary Hill fit perfectly with Virginia’s concept of being among the ‘ruling elite.’

Virginia loved life on Seminary Hill. She enjoyed the countryside and, more importantly, the people she found there. She remembered that “people in Virginia have the most beautiful manners in the world, and everybody called.”¹⁷⁷ She felt surrounded by gentility and was accepted by the native Virginians because she had been “placed” in Birmingham society. Virginia felt at home among the gentility of the countryside, while at the same time undertaking the fight for the dispossessed. It was a paradox Virginia maintained throughout her life. As one writer noted, Virginia struggled between “her inherited desire to be a Southern aristocrat and her acquired devotion to the role of political activist.”¹⁷⁸

Virginia did not want to live in Washington because she wanted more room and feared for Ann’s safety there. During her first year, Virginia felt isolated from the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 100.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 78, 97.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁷⁸ Wendy Gimbel, “Pride of Place,” *The Nation*, 29 March 1986 (464).

capitol. In 1935, the Durrs were able to buy an old farm house on Seminary Hill, where, after two miscarriages, she gave birth to a healthy son, Clifford Judkins Durr, Jr. The Durrs were the first “new dealers” on Seminary Hill, and for that reason, Virginia had little to do with the activities in Washington. Although her sister, Josephine, took Virginia to receptions and teas in the capital, she never felt a part of that world.¹⁷⁹ In fact, she refused to play bridge with the wives of the RFC members, as she found the games to be a “horrible bore.”¹⁸⁰ During their early days in Washington, both Cliff and Virginia were transformed into ardent supporters of FDR. Initially drawn to the capital for need of employment, by 1936, Cliff was dedicated to the New Deal and even defended Roosevelt’s “court packing” scheme in 1937.¹⁸¹ Virginia as well began to see the hope that the New Deal offered and found her own outlet for activism among other women.

In 1935, Ann began attending school at the St. Agnes Episcopal School on Seminary Hill. Stella Landis, whose husband worked in the Securities and Exchange Commission, began to take Virginia to hear Supreme Court cases in Washington. Jim Landis worked as Justice Brandeis’s law clerk, and Stella had a close connection with many of the layers and judges in the capital. Virginia loved the ceremony of Washington life and became acquainted, through Stella, with some of the wives of Supreme Court justices, including Mrs. Brandeis. Stella also took Virginia to hear congressional hearings. Through her friendship with Stella, Virginia began to take an interest in life in Washington D.C. and found it a fascinating place.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 56.

¹⁸⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 96.

¹⁸¹ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 52-54.

¹⁸² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 97-98.

Although Virginia claimed that her political awareness occurred when she moved to Washington, her letters suggest that she was interested in political theory and economics before she left Birmingham. In 1931, she began a life-long correspondence with Corliss Lamont. Lamont, born of a wealthy New York family, championed the working class and civil liberties, wrote poetry and philosophy, and eventually became a professor of Humanities at Columbia University. In the early years of their writing, Lamont shared his views on Socialism with Durr.¹⁸³ Durr thanked him, assuring him that “while I am not a convert yet I am going to hear Norman Thomas next month here. Quite a bold step in an ardent Democrat.”¹⁸⁴ Corliss and Virginia freely discussed both political ideology and the current political situation, and their exchange perhaps made a profound impact on Virginia’s view of both race and labor. Although they often disagreed, Lamont encouraged Virginia’s thought process; he wrote Durr, “I think you have a lot of stimulating ideas, a far larger proportion of which are sound than those of the average person.”¹⁸⁵ Their exchange also affected how she came to see herself in Washington and her desire to find an outlet for her beliefs.

Clifford Durr was one of several Southerners who moved to Washington during the early part of Roosevelt’s administration. Although Cliff’s entry into the New Deal was due to financial needs and not ideological concerns, for other Southerners, “the New Deal was training those who in the future worked for its idealistic goals.”¹⁸⁶ Although most Southerners were appointed primarily for political reasons, a handful held key

¹⁸³ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 29 June 1931, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178; Corliss Lamont to Virginia Durr, 25 February 1934, box 3, folder 178, VFD Schlesinger Papers; Corliss Lamont, 14 May 1932, box 3, folder 178, VFD Schlesinger Papers.

¹⁸⁴ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 16 February 1933, box 3, folder 178, VFD Schlesinger Papers.

¹⁸⁵ Corliss Lamont to Virginia Durr, 18 December 1939, box 3, folder 178, VFD Schlesinger Papers.

¹⁸⁶ Frank Freidel, “The South and the New Deal,” in *The New Deal and the South*, James C. Cobb, Michael V. Namorato, eds. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984): 35-36.

positions within the administration. Aubrey Williams, described as one of the most “radical-outspoken” Southern New Dealers was appointed as deputy administrator of the Works Progress Administration and, later, as head of the National Youth Administration.¹⁸⁷ Clark Foreman, whom Virginia had known during her time at Wellesley, had worked for the Georgia Committee on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), which attempted to provide a working dialogue between southern African Americans and whites, and was appointed as “Special Advisor on the Economic Status of Negroes,” serving under Harold Ickes. Another newcomer to Washington was a young ambitious politician from Texas named Lyndon Johnson. Virginia met Johnson shortly after his election to Congress in 1937 and was impressed by his commitment to abolishing poverty, particularly providing electricity to impoverished rural areas. Virginia and Johnson’s wife, Lady Bird, became good friends during their time in Washington, and continued a correspondence well into the 1970s.¹⁸⁸ According to Virginia, life in Washington contained a lot of “fraternization,” with the Durrs both hosting and attending dinners and parties for the Southern New Dealers who began to congregate in Washington.¹⁸⁹

In recent years, scholars have produced a variety of works examining this group of Southern “liberals” who embraced the New Deal and its challenge to the status quo.¹⁹⁰ Yet, even the definition of Southern liberal has little consensus. While some scholars

¹⁸⁷ John A. Salmond, “The Great Southern Commie Hunt: Aubrey Williams, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, and Internal Security Subcommittee,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77 (1978): 434.

¹⁸⁸ Virginia Foster Durr, interview by Mary Walton Livingston, transcript, 17 October 1967, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, 6-11.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹⁰ One of the most thorough works of the period on southern liberalism is Patricia Sullivan’s *Days of Hope of Hope*; yet, other well-researched overviews on the southern liberals of the 1930s include Martin Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, Anthony Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959*, and John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement*.

insist on an economic interpretation, both Martin Sosna and Patricia Sullivan use the term to characterize the group of Southerners who during and after the 1930s challenged the system of segregation and racial intolerance that defined the South.¹⁹¹ While there was no agreement among these Southerners as to the best method of dismantling segregation, most had an extreme loyalty to the South and regarded the problem as one best handled by Southerners, albeit with the support of the federal government.¹⁹² Regardless of the route they took, these “southern liberals,” who were “confined by racial and sectional identity,” emerged as “apologists for the segregation system.”¹⁹³ Although historians have emphasized World War II and the modern Civil Rights Movement as the real vehicles for change in Southern race relations, during the 1930s, Southern liberals “had helped create a climate whereby a federally enforced revolution in the South was actually achieved.”¹⁹⁴ Given Sosna and Sullivan’s definition, Virginia Durr can unequivocally be considered a Southern liberal.

As Virginia came increasingly in contact with other New Dealers, she began to want to find a way to work for change as well. As Susan Ware demonstrates, the “experimental, reformist atmosphere” of the New Deal encouraged women’s participation in politics and public life.¹⁹⁵ Central to women’s involvement in the New Deal was the creation of a female “network,” based on “friendship and cooperation among the women, which maximized their influence in politics and government.”¹⁹⁶ Many women of this generation, who operated between the Woman Movement of the

¹⁹¹ Sosna, *Silent South*, viii; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 164.

¹⁹² Sosna, *Silent South*, ix.

¹⁹³ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 166.

¹⁹⁴ Sosna, *Silent South*, 207.

¹⁹⁵ Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 6.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

early twentieth century and the Women's Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, focused their attention on social reform. Rosanne Comacho argues that Lillian Smith, author and activist who was an older contemporary of Durr's, viewed herself neither as a feminist nor as a churchwoman. Smith's upbringing was similar to Durr's—she was put on a pedestal as a Southern lady, reared by black 'mammies,' and indoctrinated with ideas of white supremacy. Similarly, Smith, like Durr, did not consider herself a feminist when she began arguing for civil rights for African Americans. Smith and Durr's activism was similar to that of many women involved in New Deal politics and political agencies who felt that they were uplifting their sex, although they considered themselves reformers, not feminists.¹⁹⁷

The presiding leader within the women's network was the First Lady. Eleanor Roosevelt impacted many of the women in Washington, who often regarded her as "their own spiritual leader, equally important as the President."¹⁹⁸ Eleanor's charisma, her charm, and her unequivocal belief in her causes inspired many women to agitate for their own agendas, particularly those humanitarian in nature. Roosevelt's biographer argues, Eleanor Roosevelt's self-appointed task was to agitate and inspire community action, encourage democratic movements for change. . . . She was close to NAACP leader Walter White, and educator Mary McLeod Bethune. . . and to white agitators Lucy Randolph Mason, Aubrey Williams, and Virginia Durr."¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Rosanne V. Camacho, "Race, Religion, and Gender in a Reassessment of Lillian Smith," in *Southern Women: Histories and Identities*, Virginia Bernhard, et. al., eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992): 170; Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*, 7.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹⁹ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, vol. II, 1933-1938* (New York: Viking Press, 1999), 4.

Virginia greatly admired Eleanor Roosevelt and was motivated by her activism. At a garden party, Virginia had met Roosevelt and found her “absolutely lovely. . . .she gave the impression of beauty and graciousness and charm and cordiality.”²⁰⁰ She was, to Virginia, a “lady” to whom Virginia could both relate and admire. Their friendship continued after the New Deal ended, and during the early 1950s, when Virginia was called to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security which investigated the Southern Conference Educational Fund, Roosevelt defended Durr both privately as well as publicly.²⁰¹

Upon learning that Mrs. Roosevelt supported the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee, Virginia decided to volunteer. Leaving her children with a nurse, Virginia ventured into the political life of the Democratic Party in Washington D.C. Anne Firor Scott argues that women’s participation in the New Deal can be traced to a long history among women whose activism was aimed at making the government responsible for social welfare.²⁰² Initially Virginia entered the political scene, intrigued by excitement. But she soon found herself, like many women working in New Deal politics, firmly committed to social betterment.

By the mid-1930s, the Women’s Division of the Democratic Party gained strength and was intended to be a “broker to place competent and loyal party women in the federal government.”²⁰³ Although Virginia’s initial responsibility was that of answering phones and clipping newspapers, she soon became actively involved in helping to try and

²⁰⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 99.

²⁰¹ Virginia Durr to Eleanor Roosevelt, 31 March 1954, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 5; Eleanor Roosevelt to Virginia Durr, 9 April 1954, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 5.

²⁰² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 100; Scott, *Natural Allies*, 177.

²⁰³ Martha H. Swain, “The Public Role of Southern Women,” in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983): 39.

implement the “50-50 plan”—the concept that all Democratic committees would represent fifty percent men and fifty percent women. This was particularly a challenge for the South, where no Southern woman sat on any Democratic committee, and the Southern women involved in the National Committee were “usually pretty Southern women who wore big hats and sang ‘Dixie.’”²⁰⁴ During the course of its term, the “50-50 plan” did not succeed. By 1937, only seventeen states had adopted it. The primary resistance to the plan came, in part, from white men.²⁰⁵ For the most part, women remained almost entirely excluded from Democratic politics in the South.

The Women’s Division decided that the primary obstacle that prevented women from voting in the South was the poll tax. Not only did the poll tax disfranchise blacks and poor whites, it also disfranchised many women, whose husbands often felt that their voting rights, and thus their poll tax payment, took precedence. In states such as Alabama and Virginia, the poll tax was retroactive. In fact, Virginia recalled that, when she married Cliff, her poll tax had lapsed, and Cliff had to pay fifteen dollars in order for Virginia to cast her ballot. Thus, when the Women’s Division began to focus its attention on getting rid of the poll tax, Virginia was willing to take on the battle.²⁰⁶

With three children at home (Lucy had been born in January of 1937), and four servants to care for them, Virginia began devoting much of her time to abolishing the poll tax.²⁰⁷ Although Virginia was content with her life at home, she felt that she “wanted to be in Washington in the midst of all the excitement, because the New Deal to me was

²⁰⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 101.

²⁰⁵ Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*, 79-80.

²⁰⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 102-103.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

perfectly thrilling.”²⁰⁸ Furthermore, Virginia claimed that she had started to become “something of a feminist” during her time in Washington.²⁰⁹ She became increasingly resentful of the lack of political participation by Southern women, as well as their socially prescribed roles as ‘nice’ wives and mothers. Virginia’s fight against the poll tax initially had little to do with fighting black discrimination in the South, and more to do with her anger about the political limitations of Southern women.²¹⁰

While working in Washington, Virginia once again came in contact with Clark Foreman. After an extensive education in London and Europe, Foreman returned to the United States bent on challenging racism. He was hired by Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, to ensure that African Americans received a share of public works jobs. Foreman was an archetype of Southern New Dealers, an activist “who offered a stark contrast to those Southern statesmen who had risen through the ranks of the Democratic Party to powerful positions on Capital Hill.”²¹¹ Upon his arrival in Washington, Foreman caused a scandal by hiring a black secretary. Over dinner one Sunday afternoon, Clark told Virginia his intentions in the Public Works Administration and his desire to end racism. Virginia recalled that she “fell into a fit,” accusing Clark of going back on Southern tradition and undermining the very cause of the Civil War. Clark responded by calling Virginia a prejudiced, racist, provincial Southern girl.²¹² Clearly, Virginia had not yet come to question the racial practices of the South by 1933.

Despite their rocky beginning, the Foremans became close friends with the Durrs. Not only did Virginia become friends with other Southern whites during her time in

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 102-103.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 103.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 42.

²¹² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 103-104.

Washington, she also became acquainted with African Americans who worked in the New Deal. Aubrey Williams introduced Virginia to Mary McLeod Bethune, and Robert Weaver was Clark Foreman's assistant. Bethune, the first black woman appointed to a high government position as director of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration, highly impressed Virginia. Despite her gender, Bethune served as a representative not for women, but for her race. The women's view of Bethune, who was not considered part of the women's network, demonstrates the racial limitations that existed, even among liberal women during the 1930s.²¹³

At a dinner given by the Foremans, Virginia also met Mattiwilda Dobbs, the aunt of Maynard Jackson and a renowned soprano.²¹⁴ One evening, Mairi Foreman asked Virginia to help her serve tea for the Dobbs family after one of Mattiwilda's concerts. Virginia recalled that serving tea to a black family was "quite a reversal of roles," but she found the Dobbs family "so charming and sweet," and Mattiwilda's mother, "had those wonderful Southern manners that are like oil on troubled waters."²¹⁵ Mrs. Dobbs, like Eleanor Roosevelt, was a true 'lady' in Virginia's eyes and demonstrated that African American women, too, could have a proper Southern upbringing. It was, perhaps, the first time Virginia realized that African American women were 'ladies' in behavior and that realization accorded them Durr's respect.

Although Hugo and Josephine Black were in a "much higher" circle than the Durrs, they also introduced Virginia to New Deal supporters and other Southerners. She became acquainted with Lister Hill, Claude Pepper, Thurmond Arnold, Robert La Follette, Jr., and John L. Lewis, founder of the Committee for Industrial Organization

²¹³ Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*, 13.

²¹⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 104.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* 105.

(later the Congress of Industrial Organizations). Virginia was eager to meet Lewis, as he “loomed over Washington like some great big giant,” and she found him to be a courteous, intelligent man who spoke “with such resonance that he sounded like a Shakespearean actor.”²¹⁶ A friendship slowly grew between the Durrs and the Lewis family, including their daughter Kathryn.

Through John L. Lewis, Virginia also met Lucy Randolph Mason, who worked as a publicist for the CIO. Influenced by Christianity, Mason was driven by three primary concerns—labor, feminism, and the South.²¹⁷ Mason particularly impressed Virginia, whose family roots could be traced to the American Revolution, and who appeared to Virginia to be “the perfect Southern lady for whom men would instinctively rise to offer a seat.”²¹⁸ Virginia recognized that she could be both a lady and an activist. Eleanor Roosevelt and Lucy Mason demonstrated that a woman need not choose either/or, but could incorporate the two, using each to further her agenda.

Increasingly Virginia became aware of the labor problems in the South. Her association with John L. Lewis, as well as her friendship with Ida Engeman, who worked for the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, opened Virginia’s eyes to the plight and poverty of workers in the South. But Virginia’s real education occurred when she began attending the Senate subcommittee’s hearings on civil liberties, led by Robert La Follette, Jr. The La Follette Civil Liberties Committee grew out of the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, headed by Hugo Black, then a Senator. The La Follette Committee investigated cases from 1936-1940, examining infringements on the

²¹⁶ Ibid., 106-107.

²¹⁷ John A. Salmund, *Miss Lucy of the CIO: The Life and Times of Lucy Randolph Mason, 1882-1959* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

²¹⁸ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 188.

rights of workers to organize and collectively bargain. The particular focus of the committee was to highlight anti-labor violence in the South and to demonstrate how both Southern industry and local government prevented labor organization.²¹⁹ Furthermore, it also served as one of many committees whose purpose was “to influence public opinion and mobilize support for [New Deal] programs.”²²⁰

In 1938, the Durrs’s son, Cliff, contracted appendicitis at the age of three. His appendix burst and the boy died after three days in the hospital. It was a blow from which the Durrs, and particularly Cliff, never fully recovered. The Durr’s daughter Lucy, who was too young to remember Cliff Jr., said that her mother rarely spoke of the boy. For the rest of her life, when young Cliff was mentioned or referred to, tears came to Virginia’s eyes. It was a tragedy that devastated Virginia and, understandably, plunged her into a depression.²²¹

For Virginia, however, the La Follette hearings helped distract her from her grief and depression. Virginia began attending the hearings every day, enthralled by the drama played out by such hearings as the ones on Harlan County, Kentucky, the Little Steel strike in Ohio, the automobile workers’ strike, and the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company in Birmingham, a case which particularly hit close to home for Virginia.²²² She was astounded by violence and injustice committed against some of the labor organizers in Birmingham. She knew some of the men charged with the crimes and actually sent them telegrams asking them to proclaim their innocence. Few did. Virginia

²¹⁹ Jerold S. Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), 1, 6; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 97-98.

²²⁰ Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty*, 1.

²²¹ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 56-57; Lucy Durr Hackney, interview with author.

²²² “Clifford J. Durr, Jr. Dies After Operation,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 23 April 1938, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 4; Sterling Black to Josephine Black, n.d., VFD Papers, box 1, folder 3; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 109-110.

also wrote to the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, demanding an explanation for what she felt was poor coverage of the hearings by the newspaper. The reply was less than cordial, as Grover C. Hall characterized her as “a liberal! That is to say as intolerant as an 18th century monk, as unimaginative as a Liberty Leaguer, and Oh, ever so political!”²²³ Virginia did send Hall a “magnoliaed gesture,” and they mended their rift; however, the hearings permanently damaged Virginia’s view of her native town.²²⁴

While attending the hearings, Virginia became intrigued by the brutal attack on Joseph Gelders, a former physics instructor who worked for the communist-affiliated National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. In September of 1936, three unknown men kidnapped Gelders and savagely beat him. They then threw Gelders from their car about sixty miles from where he was abducted. While the Klan was not directly involved in the attack, the beating of Joe Gelders was part of the general terror to rid the South of radical agitators. Although Gelders identified his attackers, a grand jury failed to indict the men. As the committee investigated the attack, Virginia realized that Cliff had attended the University of Alabama with Gelders, and Virginia had gone to school with Joseph’s brother. After Gelders left the hospital from his attack, Virginia decided to meet him. He took Virginia outside to talk, telling her that his office was wire-tapped by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Gelders told Virginia of his transformation from physics professor at the University of Alabama to a socialist during the Depression. Although he told Virginia that he never joined the Socialist or Communist Party, Gelders

²²³ C. C. Williams to Virginia Durr, 28 July 1938, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 3; Grover C. Hall to Virginia Durr, 24 July 1938, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 3.

²²⁴ Grover C. Hall to Virginia Durr, 27 July 1938, Southern Conference for Human Welfare Papers [hereafter cited as SCHW Papers], Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives, Atlanta, Georgia, box 34, folder 3.

began devoting his work to helping Southern sharecroppers organize.²²⁵ Virginia immediately took a liking to Gelders and his wife and included them in her growing circle of friends. While organized labor continued to struggle in the South, some inroads were made, in large part due to the La Follette Committee's investigation and the support of the Roosevelt administration.²²⁶

During the course of the LaFollette hearings, the Durrs were confronted with a personal and political scandal. In 1937, the Senate confirmed Hugo Black as a Justice of the Supreme Court. During his confirmation, his past membership in the Ku Klux Klan became public knowledge. Ambitious and young, Black had taken the oath after a massive Klan rally in Edgewood Park, Alabama, in 1923. According to Glenn Feldman, Black and other politicians (like Bibb Graves) "were political opportunists who used Klan strength to further their own careers and could never be mistaken for fanatics or more extreme Kluxers."²²⁷ While Black was only a member from 1923-1925, his activity brought him success, as he was elected to the Senate because of his past Klan membership. Black "caught the Klan at the crest of its postwar [World War I] revival and rode its tide to the Senate."²²⁸

The scandal over Black's Klan membership became a source of embarrassment for Roosevelt; yet, Black managed to weather the storm successfully. After returning

²²⁵ Although Gelders publicly denied joining the Communist Party, according to historian Robin Kelly, Gelders did, in fact, formally join the Party. See Robin D.G. Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (University of North Carolina, 1990), 191.

²²⁶ "Alabaman Abducted, Beaten, Left in Road," *New York Times*, 25 September 1936; Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 254-257; Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty*, 95; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 111-114.; Lee Collier, "The Solid South Cracks," *New Republic*, 23 March 1938: 185-186.

²²⁷ Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama*, 88.

²²⁸ Virginia V. Hamilton, "Hugo Black and Southern Violence," in *Perspectives on the American South: An Annual Review of Society, Politics, and Culture*, vol. I., eds. Merle Black and John Shelton Reed (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1981), 6.

from a trip to Europe, during which the story broke to the public, Hugo and Josephine isolated themselves in the Durrs' home in Virginia.²²⁹ Driving home from Norfolk, where the Blacks disembarked, Cliff recalled had "aspects of an early Keystone Cops comedy," with reporters chasing them in cars and hiding in bushes.²³⁰ Cliff worked to keep the press away from Black, as well as intercepting phone calls and death threats. Cliff also helped Hugo write the radio speech in which Black publicly addressed the issue of his Klan membership. Although the press conference was scheduled to occur on the Durrs' front lawn, reporters overwhelmed the residence and the lack of security forced Black to move the conference to a home in Washington. In Black's speech, which was heard by more than 40,000 listeners, he defended his record on civil liberties and constitutional rights, but also admitted to his Klan involvement during the 1920s. Having disassociated himself from the Klan when he became Senator, Black promised to uphold constitutional rights and justice for all Americans during his term as Supreme Court Justice.²³¹

In 1971, after Black's death, Clifford Durr wrote an article for the *Georgia Law Review* both defending and praising Hugo. Durr argued that Black was committed to the Constitution, particularly upholding the Bill of Rights, and that Black believed "his attention upon the rights and welfare of people. . . was what government is all about and the only justification for its existence."²³² Durr likened Black's transformation from a Klan member to a defender of civil rights to that of Paul on the road to Damascus and

²²⁹ "Black Reported to Have Called President on Phone After Landing," *New York Times*, 30 September 1937.

²³⁰ Clifford J. Durr, "Hugo Black: A Personal Appraisal," *Georgia Law Review* 6 (1971): 12.

²³¹ "Justice Black's Speech," *New York Times*, n.d., Clifford J. Durr Papers, box 4, folder 7; Newman, *Hugo Black*, 255-258; Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama*, 229-234.

²³² Durr, "Hugo Black," 2.

claimed that Black joined that Klan out of “conformity” and not because of personal bigotry.²³³ Historian John Feldman argues, however, that Durr would never have joined the Klan, “no matter how suffocating the pressure to conform or how intense the political ambition.”²³⁴ In her later years, Virginia also defended her brother-in-law. While attending a symposium on Hugo Black at the University of Alabama in 1985, Virginia said of the Justice, “He never had any great bitterness toward the people of Alabama because he always felt he was one of them.”²³⁵ Referring to Black’s Klan membership, Durr further offered, “It’s very difficult in the South to be self-righteous. We were all segregationists when we grew up. You can’t say everybody else is a son of a bitch or wrong if you were exactly the same way yourself.”²³⁶

Despite the scandal over Hugo Black’s Klan involvement, Virginia continued her work in the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee. Yet, even as Virginia was becoming more political aware, the Women’s Division suffered a blow. Jim Farley, chairman of the Democratic Committee, told the Women’s Division they had to cease their campaign against the poll tax. Despite the women’s appeal to Mrs. Roosevelt, the Division was forced to relent. According to Virginia, the challenge to the patriarchal South proved too radical.²³⁷ Yet, Virginia would continue to work for the abolition of the poll tax and become involved in the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, an organization that grew out of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.

²³³ Ibid., 16, 7.

²³⁴ Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama*, 233-34.

²³⁵ David Margolick, “Enigma of Justice Black is Examined,” *New York Times*, 14 April 1985.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Virginia and Clifford Durr, interview with Michael L. Gillette, 1 March 1975, transcript, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, 5.

CHAPTER IV

SCHW AND THE FIGHT AGAINST THE POLL TAX

The apex of Southern liberalism came in 1938, with the first meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW). Inspired by the reformist atmosphere of the New Deal, Southern liberals began to envision a South built upon interracial cooperation and economic revitalization. It was a movement to be led, foremost, by Southerners, who understood the needs of their region and were dedicated to its betterment. Linda Reed characterizes the Southern Conference for Human Welfare as the “progressive movement” of the 1930s and likens it to the Abolitionists, the Populists, and the muckrackers of the Progressive Era, as “each group, like the southern liberals, foresaw and anticipated resolutions to grave societal problems that the federal government eventually addressed.”²³⁸

The SCHW immediately attracted Virginia Durr. The practical nature of the organization—identifying problems and proposing solutions as opposed to drafting ideology—appealed to Durr’s personality and provided an outlet for her activism after the demise of the Women’s Division of the Democratic Party’s “50-50” plan. Through the SCHW, Durr once again came in contact with likeminded Southerners, who created a community identity that Durr both needed and embraced. The SCHW ultimately

²³⁸ Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), xx, xxvi.

included in their agenda a cause that Virginia championed for the following decade—the fight against the poll tax.

Cliff and Virginia's involvement in the SCHW came as a result of Cliff's joining the Southern Policy Committee (SPC), a committee comprised of Southern New Dealers who met to discuss the economic problems of the South. Informal at first, meeting at Hall's Restaurant in Washington, Southerners addressed problems in their region and began to propose solutions. Most prominent in the SPC were Clark Foreman, Hugo Black, Lister Hill, and Clifford Durr. In 1938, Roosevelt welcomed the SPC's suggestion that a pamphlet be drawn up to address the region's most pressing problems. FDR insisted, however, that the document only address the region's problems and not propose solutions. The result was the National Emergency Council's *Report on the Economic Conditions of the South*, written largely by Clark Foreman. Jack Fischer, Arthur Goldschmidt, Frank Graham, and Clifford Durr also helped develop the document.²³⁹ While Virginia was not included in the group, "no women were," much of the pamphlet was written in her living room, while Virginia brought coffee and listened to the arguments that ensued.²⁴⁰

The *Report*, while demonstrating that the South was the country's poorest region, claimed that it had the potential for being one of the most productive regions. The *Report* addressed specific issues in Southern society—among them, soil and water wastage, poor education, private and public income, housing and health, unemployment, child labor, industry, credit, and farm income. Clifford Durr wrote both the President's

²³⁹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 63; Steve Davis, "The South as 'the Nation's No. 1 Economic Problem': The NEC Report of 1938," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 62 (1978): 121.

²⁴⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 116.

letter to Lowell Mellett, requesting the report, and the section on credit.²⁴¹ The document and its findings prompted Roosevelt to term the South, the “Nation’s No. 1 economic problem,” and that the problems outlined were not merely the South’s problems, but those of the “Nation as a whole.”²⁴² After the conclusion of the *Report*, many of its supporters came to realize that Roosevelt had little intention on acting on the issues, but regarded its drafting as a campaign tool, part of his process of political realignment.²⁴³ Nevertheless, “the Roosevelt administration and the NEC linked Southern poverty and racism in an unprecedented way, but having presented a negative comment on the South, left Southerners to search for their own solutions.”²⁴⁴ Yet, the results of the *Report* “were far-reaching in that a new consciousness began to dawn and the common white masses awakened to their plight.”²⁴⁵ From the stark picture painted by the NEC *Report* came the founding of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.

While discussing the document, a group of Southerners, among them Joseph Gelders, suggested the formation of an interracial group committed to addressing and proposing solutions for the South in July of 1938. Gelders also approached Mrs. Roosevelt to obtain her support for a conference, and she readily agreed. By August, plans to form an organization were solidified and a general meeting scheduled for the fall.²⁴⁶ According to Virginia, the NEC *Report* became a “kind of Bible” for Southern New Dealers.²⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, not all Southerners welcomed the NEC’s depiction of their region. Some Southern politicians applauded the document, claiming that it

²⁴¹ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, xx; Clifford Durr to Bill Rascoe, 17 September 1964, SCHW Papers, box 3, folder 9.

²⁴² “Economic Conditions of the South,” 1.

²⁴³ Davis, “NEC Report,” 129; Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 598-99.

²⁴⁴ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, xx.

²⁴⁵ William M. Brewer, “The Poll Tax and the Poll Taxers,” *Journal of Negro History* 29 (July 1944): 271.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²⁴⁷ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 66.

demonstrated how the administration failed to provide financial support to the region, while other Southerners balked at the characterization of the South as an “economic problem,” a description they had long sought to ignore.²⁴⁸ Yet, Roosevelt’s willingness to issue a request for the conditions in the South, “encouraged those who wanted change in the South that the time was ripe for the creation of a broadly based organization of Southern liberals.”²⁴⁹

On November 20, 1938, more than 1200 delegates met in Birmingham, Alabama, descending on the city “like a cleansing flood, animated one and all with one selfless purpose—to help the South thru [sic] the democratic process of free speech and frank discussion.”²⁵⁰ The delegates represented labor, educators, New Dealers, churches, and “a cross section of every possible special-interest group in the region.”²⁵¹ The only restriction put on delegates was that they had to be born in, or currently reside in, the South. While visitors were welcomed, the SCHW’s decisions were to be made by Southerners alone.²⁵² Virginia attended as the delegate from the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee. The first night of the meeting, Virginia recalled as “full of love and hope. It was thrilling. . . .The whole South was coming together to make a new day.”²⁵³ It was, as Virginia described it, the “new deal come south.”²⁵⁴ In his opening speech, Dr. Frank Graham, president of the University of North Carolina, embraced some of Durr’s hyperbole, by declaring to the delegates, “Let us show that this

²⁴⁸ Davis, “NEC Report,” 122-123.

²⁴⁹ Sosna, *Silent South*, 89.

²⁵⁰ “Report of the Proceedings of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare,” n.d., SCEF Papers, box 15, folder 184, p. 5.

²⁵¹ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 15.

²⁵² “Report of the Proceedings” p. 5.

²⁵³ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 120.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Conference stands for the Sermon on the Mount, the American Bill of Rights and American democracy.”²⁵⁵

The delegates and attendees read like a “who’s who” of Southern liberalism. Dr. Frank Graham served as chairman, Dr. W.T. Couch from the University of North Carolina Press sat on the Program Committee, Aubrey Williams gave a speech during the Labor Relations and Unemployment section, Myles Horton from Highlander Folk School sat on the Committee on Resolutions along with sociologist Dr. Arthur Raper and Lucy Randolph Mason. The Conference committee appointed Virginia Durr, along with Joseph Gelders, as one of the speakers during the Constitutional Rights Section. Virginia’s speech called for the education of the public by the government, and not by the propagandized press, controlled by Wall Street.²⁵⁶ The *Tuscaloosa News* took issue with Virginia’s speech, claiming that “what Mrs. Durr really wants is not a free press, but rather a press which is devoted freely to her left-winged ideas.”²⁵⁷ It was one of the first times Virginia faced ‘leftist’ charges.

Hugo Black also attended the conference, as he was given the first Thomas Jefferson Award as a Southerner “who has done most to promote human and social welfare in line with the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson.”²⁵⁸ Giving even more weight to the Conference was the attendance of Eleanor Roosevelt. Lucy Randolph Mason encouraged Roosevelt to attend, as well as give a key-note address on education. The President sanctioned his wife’s travel to Birmingham, and encouraged the SCHW to add

²⁵⁵ “Report of the Proceedings,” p. 29.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., “Sweeping Moves Urged to Aid South,” *New York Times*, 23 November 1938, 23.

²⁵⁷ “Tuscaloosa News Takes Mrs. Durr to Task for Speech,” clipping, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 12.

²⁵⁸ “Report on the Proceedings,” 24.

eliminating the poll tax to its agenda in order to broaden the base of the Democratic Party.²⁵⁹

The first challenge to the meeting, however, came the following morning when local police, under the direction of Eugene “Bull” Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham, charged the delegates with violating the local segregation laws by holding an integrated meeting. Perhaps under the direction of Republican Party publicity agent J.D. Brown, “Bull” Conner arrived at the Conference with a riot squad, demanding that the segregation ordinance be observed. The delegates divided the auditorium, seating blacks on one side and whites on another. Eleanor Roosevelt responded to the order by placing her chair in the center of the isles, refusing to be segregated. Mrs. Roosevelt’s actions profoundly impressed Virginia.²⁶⁰

To assert that the SCHW was founded to promote racial equality is an overstatement. Yet, the challenge Bull Conner set before the Conference forced delegates to make a stand on the issue of segregation.²⁶¹ In one of its many resolutions adopted during the conference, the SCHW resolved to never again select a meeting place in a ‘Jim Crow’ city.²⁶² While not explicitly denouncing segregation, the SCHW did state that the organization would “endeavor to secure unity of action and maximum cooperation of all Southern progressives. . . . regardless of race, creed, or color,” in order

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 7-10; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 510; “Sweeping Moves Urged”; “Poll Tax Emerges as Issue in 1940,” *New York Times*, 18 September 1938, 75.

²⁶⁰ George Londa to Mr. Bliven, 27 November 1939, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 3; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 565; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 121; “‘Jim Crow’ Issue in Welfare Group,” 23 November 1938, *Washington Post*, 6.

²⁶¹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 6; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 17.

²⁶² “Southern Whites Flay Jim Crow Laws in Open Meeting,” *Chicago Defender*, 3 December 1938, 1.

to obtain its goals.²⁶³ More relevant to Virginia Durr was the resolution that the SCHW was committed to fighting the poll tax as a barrier to voting.²⁶⁴

“Through osmosis,” Virginia started to question segregation.²⁶⁵ In Washington, she had contact with many intelligent African Americans who deeply impressed her. Before her time in Washington, Virginia claimed she had thought of African Americans primarily as servants. Her views on race had undergone a radical change by the time she attended the first SCHW meeting.²⁶⁶ In particular, Mary McLeod Bethune impressed Virginia. Bethune, whom she described as “an African queen,” was addressed throughout the Conference as “Mrs.,” a term Virginia had never before heard applied to an African American woman by Southerners. Durr and Bethune became friends after the first SCHW meeting.²⁶⁷

Most delegates regarded the conference as a success. Judge Louise O. Charlton, General Chairman of the meeting, wrote of the first SCHW that it was a success because it was truly Southern; yet,

Not southern in the sense of magnolia blossoms and sweet dim memories of a by-gone age, but a solid, sensible South, aware that the War between the States is over and that the South is the garden spot of the country, but that we must till the soil, or the fairest garden soon over-runs with weeds.²⁶⁸

²⁶³ “Report of Proceedings of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare,” 11.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁶⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 121.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ “Report of Proceedings,” 5.

Yet, race continued to divide the SCHW, despite its lofty rhetoric. SCHW became committed to racial equality during the course of its existence, pushing some Southerners, who still adhered to the New South creed of segregation, out of the organization. It also made SCHW extremely vulnerable to charges of radicalism and communism.

Almost immediately, the SCHW was attacked as harboring communists and socialists. The charges of communist infiltration came not only from the right, but also from the left as well. Unfortunately for the SCHW, its creation coincided with the formation of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, headed by Martin Dies from Texas. Once the SCHW had been labeled a “Communist front” organization, the Dies committee sought to investigate. J. Parnell Thomas, a New Jersey Democrat, argued that the Communist Party funneled money to the SCHW through Joe Gelders and Rob Hall, a charge that was never substantiated. Therefore, many anti-New Dealers and conservatives charged that the organization, and, consequently, the New Deal, was working closely with the Communist Party. By calling the SCHW meeting a gathering of Communists, Republican opponents sought to use the SCHW as a political tool to smear the “left-wing” liberalism of the New Deal and its supporters.²⁶⁹

Criticism against the SCHW not only came from outside the organization. While Frank Graham claimed that, out of more than 1,200 participants, only six were Communists, conservative members of the SCHW, such as Lister Hill and John Bankhead, quickly disassociated themselves from the group. In response to the ‘red-baiting’ of the SCHW, Southern liberals who broke with the organization formed their own group the following year. The Conference of Southerners, sponsored by the

²⁶⁹ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 186-187; George Londa to Mr. Bliven, 27 November 1938, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 3; while there is no indication that the Communist Party was financing the SCHW, some members of the SCHW did have Communist ties.

Southern Policy Committee, proclaimed to represent true Southern liberals, while the SCHW supported only radicals. The criticism not only engaged the right. While the Communist Party publicly praised the SCHW, in private it denounced the organization's failure to offer concrete plans to end poverty, its lack of challenge to the local segregation laws, and the delegates' paternalism towards blacks.²⁷⁰

The communist charges against the SCHW frustrated Virginia. Never one for ideology, unless it was practical, Virginia claimed "I didn't even know what a Trotskyite was. I used to think Trotskyites were some kind of fleas. . . .it was silly to argue ideology when there were so many hard jobs to be done."²⁷¹ While Virginia readily exposed herself to both leftist ideology and left-wing associates, she never completely espoused radical ideologies. She wholeheartedly embraced the "Popular Front" political activism of the 1930s, for Virginia was a "doer," leaving the working out of ideological principles to others. In an interview with Patricia Sullivan, Virginia espoused her feelings about communists:

My position on the Communists is as it has always been—that they represent the extreme left of the political circuit, and I often disagree with their program and methods, but I see so clearly that when one group of people are made untouchable the liberties of all suffer, and our Democracy is on the way to ruin. I see and feel so clearly how it has crippled the lives and hopes of both the Negro and white people in the South.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 189; "Bankhead Backs Racial Laws," *New York Times*, 1 December 1938; "Liberal South Forms Program," *New York Times*, 22 January 1939; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 186.

²⁷¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 123, 126.

²⁷² Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 241.

Virginia readily worked with anyone within the political spectrum, regardless of creed, as long as that person sought the same goals. In that respect, she was typical of many Popular Front activists during the 1930s that often equated racial equality and class struggle.²⁷³ Nevertheless, Virginia was influenced by leftist ideas. The Depression caused her to question capitalism, and her continued correspondence with Corliss Lamont, and other radicals, such as Joe Gelders, introduced her to “left-of-center” political thought.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 only served to heighten the tensions within the SCHW. The charges of communist infiltration did not abate, and Joe Gelders in particular was singled out by those who wanted to completely disassociate the SCHW from the Communist Party. Several members within the SCHW began to call for Gelder’s resignation from the organization. Although Gelders disliked having to hide his Communist Party membership, his “vilification within the Southern Conference—the movement he had helped bring into existence—was far more devastating.”²⁷⁴ Virginia came to the defense of Gelders, writing Frank Graham and sending letters from Gelders proclaiming that he was neither cooperating with the Communist Party nor was he allowing the Party the use of the SCHW’s mailing list.²⁷⁵

Personally, Virginia’s support of the SCHW and her attendance began to alienate her from the Birmingham society of her youth. More troubling to local Alabamans was the interracial cooperation of the SCHW. She recalled that locals who opposed the meeting, particularly the Ku Klux Klan, began to imply that the conference was

²⁷³ Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 8.

²⁷⁴ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 191.

²⁷⁵ Virginia Durr to Frank Graham, November 1939, MJ Papers, box 5, folder 15.5.7.

promoting sexual relationships between the white women and black men.²⁷⁶ An editorial published in the right-winged *Alabama* magazine claimed that radical groups, including “left wing allies in the Administration” were using Southerners to promote their agenda, and that the SCHW was controlled by the “communist-infested” I.L.D. and the CIO. The editorial further went on to claim that the primary purpose of the conference was to “provide a springboard for subtle left-winged propaganda.”²⁷⁷ The conservative backlash against the organization helped instigate a new wave of white supremacist groups within Birmingham.²⁷⁸ The *Washington Post* termed the SCHW a “bungled opportunity,” whose liberal stand on race pushed many conservatives out of the group and whose direction and formation came from the White House.²⁷⁹ Conservative Alabama women also denounced the groups’ racial policy and its radical ties, calling for the resignation of Louise Charlton from the State Democratic Executive Committee.²⁸⁰ Due to its “racial-equality resolutions,” *Newsweek* claimed that the SCHW “hurt the New Deal cause far more than the conference’s many constructive discussions helped it.”²⁸¹ Yet, the Virginia Durr who returned to Birmingham in 1938 was not the same woman who left years earlier. No longer a “dilettante,” concerned with Junior League luncheons and teas, Virginia had become a political activist, dedicated to social reform and willing to face local ostracism.²⁸²

Heedless of any opposition, Virginia embraced the SCHW and focused her attention on the poll tax. In 1938, FDR openly supported anti-poll tax measures, but later

²⁷⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 123-124.

²⁷⁷ Editorial, *Alabama: The News Magazine of the Deep South*, 5 December 1938.

²⁷⁸ Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe*, 138.

²⁷⁹ Carroll Kilpatrick, “Bungled Opportunity,” *Washington Post*, 30 November 1938, 11.

²⁸⁰ “Alabama Women Ask Inquiry on Parley,” *New York Times*, 11 November 1938.

²⁸¹ “Conference Backfires,” *Newsweek*, 19 December 1938, 7.

²⁸² Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 114.

in the year, in the face of Southern opposition, he recanted his support. Despite the requests of the SCHW to make anti-poll tax legislation part of the Democratic Party's platform, Roosevelt refused.²⁸³ Nevertheless, "for a short time [FDR] had thrust the poll tax issue into the national limelight."²⁸⁴ Virginia, along with the SCHW, made the repeal of the poll tax their primary political concern. Durr placed great hope in the conference, as well as in the Southern people—"there is such a great amount of the old Populist spirit in the South that can be re-awakened if they can only get the word."²⁸⁵ During the first meeting, the SCHW delegates established a sub-committee, the Civil Rights Committee, which, in turn, formed the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax (NCAPT) in 1941. The first SCHW conference elected Virginia as vice-president of the Civil Rights Committee (CRC) of the SCHW and Texas congressman Maury Maverick as president. Virginia felt that getting rid of the poll tax "was the first step to getting the South freed of all the terrible burdens it had."²⁸⁶

By 1932, ten Southern states continued to levy a poll tax. Enacted in response to the Populist Revolt of the 1890s, the poll tax proved to be an effective measure to restrict, not only African Americans, but groups of whites who seemed to threaten the status quo of Southern politics. In Mississippi, Alabama, and Virginia, the poll tax was retroactive. Before 1953 the state of Alabama made the poll tax cumulative for twenty four years, with a maximum payment of \$36. Although supporters of the poll tax defended its

²⁸³ Telegram from Civil Rights Committee of SCHW to Franklin Roosevelt, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 24, folder 315.

²⁸⁴ Steven Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 58.

²⁸⁵ Virginia Durr to Frank Graham, November 1939, Jemison Papers, box 5, folder 15.5.7.

²⁸⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 124.

existence as a revenue mechanism, its primary purpose was to restrict voting.²⁸⁷

Repealers agreed that the political careers of Southern white males “depended upon the maintenance not only of one party, but upon a limited and disinterested electorate.”²⁸⁸

While the poll tax may not have been the only, or even the most restrictive, measure to prevent political participation in the South, it was the most visible, and seemingly the easiest form to dismantle.²⁸⁹ Yet, writing in 1944, William Brewer argued,

When Rhode Island, one of the smallest States, casts more votes in the choice of two Representatives than Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina do in the selection of thirty-two members of the Congress, the poll tax machines become a matter of serious national concern.²⁹⁰

By disfranchising both poor whites, as well as African Americans, the poll tax fostered an interracial struggle for its abolition.

The poll tax not only disfranchised poor whites and African Americans, it also severely curtailed women’s participation in Southern politics. In Louisiana and Alabama, the poll tax served to disfranchise a large number of white women, whose husbands’ poll tax payment took precedence. Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman argues that the battle for woman’s suffrage did not conclude in 1920; the poll tax became the pivotal issue that disfranchised women during the depression years, and women actively worked at the federal and state level for its abolition. The exclusion of women from Southern politics

²⁸⁷Frederic D. Ogden, *The Poll Tax in the South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1958), 578-59; C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 336-337.

²⁸⁸Brewer, “The Poll Tax,” 264.

²⁸⁹Ogden, *Poll Tax*, 33, 59; V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 580; V.O. Key maintains that emphasizing the poll tax as the primary force for restricting voting in the South is “both naïve and misleading.” Key, *Southern Politics*, 579.

²⁹⁰Brewer, “Poll Tax,” 284.

initially drew Virginia Durr into the NCAPT, as it had with her participation in the Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee.

Many Southern women shared Virginia's frustration. On the twentieth anniversary of the passage of the 19th amendment, a delegation of Southern women presented a petition, the Statement of One Hundred Southern Women, to Congress denouncing the poll tax. The women held a ceremony at the Capitol Building, laying a wreath on the statue of Susan B. Anthony. Caroline O'Day, in a speech before the House of Representatives, argued that the poll tax disfranchised more than four million women in the South. Virginia included her name on the petition, although she did not attend the ceremony. Due to the influence and enlightenment of Mary McLeod Bethune, Virginia realized that black support of the anti-poll tax legislation was essential. Gradually, the poll tax issue became interconnected with black voting rights. Thus, Virginia, like many women extended her sympathy and energy to obtaining the vote for the thousands of disfranchised black voters in the South.²⁹¹

After returning to Washington, Virginia and Maverick worked to get an anti-poll tax bill introduced into Congress. Initially, the committee also sought to fight the poll tax in the courts, hiring Crampton Harris as the CRC's attorney. Joseph Gelders, as executive secretary of the committee, spent much of 1939 traveling to raise funds for the committee and the \$5,000 fee for Harris. With Maverick campaigning for mayor of San Antonio, and Morrison involved in Louisiana politics, Durr and Gelders were left running

²⁹¹ Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, "The Second Battle for Woman Suffrage: Alabama White Women, the Poll Tax, and V.O. Key's Master Narrative of Southern Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 68 (May 2002): 333-375; Wilkerson-Freeman also takes issue with Key's conclusion that women's lack of participation in southern politics was due to disinterest. Odgen, *Poll Tax*, 138; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 72-73; Margot Gayle to Virginia Durr, 5 October 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 5; Durr, interview with Livingston, 15; Durr, interview with Michael Gillette, 26.

the CRC, with Virginia in the Washington office, and Gelders working throughout the South. The CRC found a champion for the anti-poll tax bill in Congressman Lee Geyer, a California Democrat, who also agreed to allow the CRC to use his office as headquarters.²⁹² The Geyer Bill, known as “H.R. 7534—A Bill to amend an Act to prevent pernicious political activities,” was referred to the House Judiciary Committee in August of 1939. Maury Maverick testified before the Committee arguing,

I want the South to be run by Southerners and the poll tax keeps that from happening. The poll tax makes the South a sort of piecemeal, part-time, fractional, divided democracy. . . .the poll tax thus becomes a luxury. This necessity of a democratic government becomes something only the privileged few can have.²⁹³

Nevertheless, the bill stalled, due in part to the resistance of the chairman, Hatton Summers of Texas, whom Virginia described as “not only unsympathetic, he was just as rude and nasty and vicious as he could be. Nasty old man!”²⁹⁴ Sending Durr a copy of the bill, vice-chairman of the CRC, James Morrison, inscribed to Virginia: “To Virginia Durr, who is the inspiration for this memorandum, and who, more than any other person will be responsible for the enfranchisement of tens of millions of Americans.”²⁹⁵

²⁹² James Morrison to Joseph Gelders, 10 July 1939, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 4; Joseph Gelders to Virginia Durr, 29 December 1939, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 4; Joseph Gelders to Virginia Durr, n.d. 1938, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 4; Maury Maverick to Virginia Durr, 16 January 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 4; Virginia Durr, speech before the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, partial transcript, 16 April 1940, SCHW Papers, box 35, folder 2; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 128; see also Richard B. Henderson, *Maury Maverick: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970).

²⁹³ Lee Geyer, “Has the Federal Congress Power to Enact Legislation Affecting the Poll Tax Laws of a State?”, *Congressional Digest* 20 (December 1941): 309.

²⁹⁴ “Drive Shaped on Poll Tax in Eight States,” *Washington Post*, 12 February 1940, 2; Virginia Durr, interview with Michael Gillette, p. 23.

²⁹⁵ “The Geyer Bill (H.R. 1024,)” 1939, SCHW Papers, box 36, folder 7.

Despite the setback of the Geyer bill, Gelders claimed that the committee never expected the legislation to pass. Instead, the CRC's goal was to distribute thousands of copies of the bill and get discussion going. Geyer encouraged the CRC to develop a new committee, whose primary purpose was the repeal of the poll tax. In 1941, with the support of the SCHW and CIO, the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax (NCAPT) was formed, largely due to Virginia Durr's efforts. By 1941, SCHW disbanded the CRC, replacing it with the NCAPT. Virginia was voted as the chair of the new committee, and remained executive vice-chairman of the NCAPT from 1940-1949.²⁹⁶ Due to the political leanings of Joseph Gelders, there was concern among both labor and liberal supporters that he would taint the fight against the poll tax. Barry Bingham, president and publisher of *The Louisville Times*, questioned Virginia as to whether she felt that the "poll tax fight is being handled in the most effective way by a person with the reputation of Joe Gelders, whether or not that reputation is entirely justified?"²⁹⁷ Despite Virginia's support of Gelders, when the NCAPT formed its governing committee, Joseph Gelders was not nominated for the executive board.²⁹⁸ According to Linda Reed, "with Durr heading the [NCAPT], SCHW finally was granting the wish of some members who wanted Gelders less visible in SCHW."²⁹⁹

Southerners, who complained that it was, once again, an example of outsiders attempting to control Southern affairs, hailed the defeat of Geyer's bill. According to historian Harvard Sitkoff, "the race issue came out of the bag. The growth of federal

²⁹⁶ "Report of Joseph Gelders, Secretary, Civil Rights Committee, Southern Conference for Human Welfare to its Second Meeting," 16 April 1940, SCHW Papers, box 1, folder 1; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 65-69; Ogden, *Poll Tax*, 250; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 70-73; for a more detailed account of the transformation of the CRC into the NCAPT, see Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 66-69.

²⁹⁷ Barry Bingham to Virginia Durr, 27 May 1940, SCHW Papers, box 37, folder 5.

²⁹⁸ Joseph Gelders to Virginia Durr, n.d., SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 15.

²⁹⁹ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 73.

power was pictured as a dagger pointed at the heart of the state's right to regulate its own racial affairs."³⁰⁰ Despite a 1942 Gallup poll citing more than half of Americans polled were in favor of poll tax repeal, Southern opposition remained entrenched. After Geyer's death in 1941, Senator Claude Pepper of Florida took up the fight against the poll tax.³⁰¹ Feeling that the NCAPT could not give Pepper the "real political support," that he needed to fight the Southern Bloc and the "native nazis" in the South, Virginia asked Eleanor Roosevelt to meet with Pepper and the bill's supporters. Mrs. Roosevelt agreed.³⁰² From 1941-1949, the NCAPT introduced the "perennial anti-poll tax bill," as it came to be called among congressmen. While the House of Representatives passed the bill five times during the period, the Senate repeatedly killed it by filibuster.³⁰³ Yet, the lobbying for the anti-poll tax bill marked "the first congressional debate on voting rights since the 1890s."³⁰⁴

From its inception, the NCAPT relied upon volunteers and contributions, and often suffered from lack of organization. Virginia worked to try and publish a newsletter and lobby for support for the anti-poll tax bill--"I was the only one who was there more or less on a permanent basis. . . .it was a very amateurish organization."³⁰⁵ While she had the moral support of friends like Lady Bird Johnson and her sister, Josephine, it was Virginia who "got all the mud thrown" on her.³⁰⁶ Virginia worked as an unpaid volunteer, running the office virtually alone. The interest over the poll tax did bring other

³⁰⁰ Sitkoff, *New Deal*, 105.

³⁰¹ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 58; Ogden, *Poll Tax*, 245; "Pending Anti-Poll Tax Measures: The Pepper Bill," *Congressional Digest* 20 (December 1941): 306.

³⁰² Virginia Durr to Eleanor Roosevelt, 30 September 1941, Series 100, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York [hereafter cited as ER Papers]; Eleanor Roosevelt to Virginia Durr, 8 October 1941, ER Papers.

³⁰³ Ogden, *Poll Tax*, 243.

³⁰⁴ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 6.

³⁰⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 129.

³⁰⁶ Durr, interview with Michael Gillette, 26.

volunteers to the office, including Palmer Weber, a recent graduate from the University of Virginia. The young college students helped Virginia work the mimeograph machine, which Virginia had no idea how to use.³⁰⁷

The Committee agreed early on to support a court challenge to the poll tax on a state level as well, although they consistently argued the best opportunity for its demise would come from the federal government. In the case of *Pirtle v. Brown*, repealers attempted, but failed, to strike down the poll tax in Tennessee. The funding for the NCAPT came from a variety of sources—CIO, American Federation of Labor, National Association the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and a variety of church groups and women’s organizations. Virginia maintained that the majority of money, especially for the *Pirtle* case, came from John L. Lewis. The committee also gathered a list of impressive national sponsors, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, Kathryn Lewis, A. Philip Randolph, Carolyn O’Day, and William Allen White. One group that did not support the anti-poll tax fight was the Women’s Division of the Democratic Committee, a stand that pushed Virginia out of the organization.³⁰⁸

Through her work with the NCAPT and congressmen, Virginia learned how to use her Southern charm to best of her abilities. While she was often subject to, what would be termed fifty years later, ‘sexual harassment,’ she also found she garnished respect out of presenting herself as a proper “lady.” She recalled being “fair game” because she was a female, but felt she fared better than most women because of her relationship with Hugo Black and due to her husband’s influence in the RFC. When he

³⁰⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 129.

³⁰⁸“U.S. Judges Uphold Tennessee Poll Tax,” *Washington Post*, 12 September 1939, 6; Civil Rights Committee pamphlet, n.d., SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 15; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 131; National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax letterhead, 1942, SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 131.

refused to outright support the legislation, Lyndon Johnson used to try and sooth Durr by putting his arm around her and calling her “honey.”³⁰⁹ There was little outrage from Virginia, as she laughingly tells the stories—for her, it was all part of the game of Washington politics. And it was a game she was learning to play effectively.

Although Virginia’s work engulfed her life, she managed to give birth to the third Durr daughter, named Virginia (and known as Tilla) in September of 1939. With a cook and nurse to care for the house and the children, Virginia continued her work in the NCAPT, despite having a house full of children and a mother who often visited. Domestic issues were never at the forefront of Virginia’s priorities. Her neighbor, Catherine Galbraith, recalled that Durr was not an over-attentive mother, nor a conscientious housekeeper. The children, particularly the eldest Ann, maintained much of the household responsibility. Full of boundless energy, Virginia also considered collaborating with Tex Goldschmidt on writing histories of the Southern states.³¹⁰

In the midst of the struggle against the poll tax, the SCHW held its second meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1940, heralding the theme “Democracy in the South.” Due to lack of financial stability, the conference cancelled its 1939 meeting, setting a precedent that the SCHW would meet every two years. Organized labor made up a large part of the delegates. Once again, the issue of Communist members surfaced during the conference. A number of delegates again broke from SCHW during 1940 and

³⁰⁹ Mrs. Charles Poletti and Mrs. Eliot D. Pratt to Virginia Durr, 15 November 1940, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 4; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 130; Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 711.

³¹⁰ Lucy Judkins Durr to Virginia Durr, 15 September 1939; Catherine Galbraith, interview with Patricia Sullivan, as quoted in Patricia Sullivan, *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years* (New York: Rutledge, 2003), 15; C. Vann Woodward to Virginia Durr, 26 January 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 5.

1941 because of its supposed communist ties.³¹¹ In an address to the SCHW, Virginia made her position clear,

My whole childhood was made miserable by points of doctrine and finally at the age of twelve I decided I was damned anyway so I relaxed. So when we came to fight the poll tax we decided we would not judge a man or woman's ability to take part in that fight on any question of doctrine. . . . We have on the right hand the [support of] the Junior League and on the left hand the Workers Alliance.³¹²

Virginia's speech was to be an introduction for Joe Gelders, and her point was not lost in reference to him. While Gelders provided an overview of the poll-tax fight thus far, including Geyer's bill, which was at the time still in the House Judiciary Committee, he noted that the real "handicap" to the poll tax effort was its lack of funds.³¹³

By the time of the second meeting of the SCHW in 1940, the war in Europe began to take center stage. W.T. Crouch expressed concern that the majority of delegates would be isolationist, and that such a position was one of a "hopeless state of mind."³¹⁴ Virginia was an interventionist and abhorred fascism. She closely watched the events in Spain, attended meetings of the Spanish Relief Committee while in Washington, and joined the United American Spanish Relief Committee. Yet, the primary force at the Chattanooga conference was John L. Lewis, a staunch isolationist. The resolutions of the 1940 conference mirrored those of the 1938 meeting, with one exception—the delegates

³¹¹ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 22-26; Sosna, *Silent South*, 141.

³¹² Virginia Durr, speech before the SCHW, partial transcript, 16 April 1940, SCHW Papers, box 1, folder 4.

³¹³ "Report of Joseph Gelders," 6; at the second meeting of the SCHW, the NCAPT had not yet been formed; therefore, Gelders was still serving as secretary for the CRC.

³¹⁴ W.T. Couch to Virginia Durr, 21 March 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 5.

included an anti-war resolution. The looming war in Europe dominated much of the conference's debates, and the Chattanooga meeting lacked the magic of the first SCHW conference. Virginia expressed concern that the enthusiasm for the SCHW seemed to be dying. She also felt that FDR had encouraged Southerners not to attend the second meeting, as he was trying to cultivate Southern support for the war. Mrs. Roosevelt did attend the conference, however, giving a speech on children and education in the South, and she continued to provide financial support for the SCHW. At the 1940 conference, Will Alexander, head of the Farm Security Administration, was awarded the Thomas Jefferson Award.³¹⁵

Returning home, Virginia continued her work with the CRC. SCHW set up state committees to operate as financially independent from the main organization. Virginia Durr and Luther Porter Jackson co-chaired the state of Virginia's committee. Virginia continued her prolific letter writing, encouraging support for the anti-poll tax legislation and expressing liberal viewpoints.³¹⁶ Grover C. Hall, with whom Virginia by then had a bantering relationship, described her as a "respectable" woman "hell-raiser."³¹⁷ The CRC still struggled with financial support, relying heavily on the support of John L. Lewis. Virginia also began to rethink the poll tax bill strategy. She informed Geyer that she thought it best that a Southerner introduce the bill. While he reminded her that no Southerner was willing to take it on, Virginia and other supporters began to focus their

³¹⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 132; U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Virginia F. Durr*, 13 May 1943 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office), 1 [hereafter cited as VFD FBI file]; Barry Bingham to Virginia Durr, 18 November 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 5; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 25-26; Joseph Gelders to Eleanor Roosevelt, 24 August 1940, SCEF Papers, box 24, folder 315; "Washington Men Honored at Session on Human Welfare," *Washington Post*, 17 April 1940, 19.

³¹⁶ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 204; Bernard Borah to Virginia Durr, 20 September 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 5; Claude Pepper to Virginia Durr, 20 June, 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 5.

³¹⁷ Grover C. Hall to Virginia Durr, 18 September 1940, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 5.

attention on Senator Claude Pepper, who did agree to take up the poll tax fight in the Senate.³¹⁸

At the invitation of James Dombrowski, Virginia also took a trip to visit Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee.³¹⁹ Virginia met Dombrowski at Chattanooga and took an instant liking to the man she described as looking like “Saint Francis of Assisi.”³²⁰ Dombrowski, chairman of the Highlander Folk School, supported the SCHW and aided the *Pirtle* case in 1939. During the 1940 SCHW conference, Eleanor Roosevelt met with a contingent from the school. She later both visited Highlander and donated money for scholarships. Dombrowski and Durr began a life-long friendship at the meeting, and Jim invited her to his labor-training school in Grundy County, Tennessee.³²¹

Established in 1932 by Myles Horton and Don West, Highlander’s principle idea was a “belief in the power of education to change society.”³²² Although established as a school to train organized labor, Highlander emerged as the educational center for civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1930s, the Highlander staff spent much of its time organizing and participating in local strikes, such as the strike in Wilder, Tennessee. The school was also committed to interracial cooperation. By the mid-1930s, Highlander received the support of the CIO and began expanding its educational

³¹⁸ Joseph Gelders to Virginia Durr, 11 November 1940; Lee Geyer to Virginia Durr, 2 February 1940; Claude Pepper to Virginia Durr, 20 June 1940.

³¹⁹ James Dombrowski to Virginia Durr, 28 October 1940;

³²⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 133.

³²¹ John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, 2d. ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 70. Supporters of Highlander also established the National Highlander Folk School Committee in Washington, D.C., which raised money for the school and was supported by Eleanor Roosevelt, Hugh Black, Harold Ickes, and Sidney Hillman. See H. Glyn Thomas, “The Highlander Folk School: The Depression Years,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 23 (1964): 368.

³²² Glen, *Highlander*, 2.; Don West, a committed socialist, remained at the school only one year. Jim Dombrowski, who shared Horton’s sympathies for labor, joined the staff.

programs and activism, pushing it into a central place in the Southern labor movement. The school attracted Virginia, who made a brief visit in 1940 and returned in 1942 to teach a course on government agencies and their effects on labor.³²³ Horton was pleased with Virginia's session, claiming, "we really should list you [Durr] as one of our teachers."³²⁴ Along with Dombrowski, Virginia also developed a life-long friendship with Myles Horton and his wife, Zilphia. Although Virginia "identified" with the labor movement, she said it took her a while to realize that "the labor movement didn't identify with me."³²⁵ Durr was not sure how to talk to the miners at Highlander—their experiences and world was too far removed from her childhood in Birmingham and her life on Seminary Hill.

Virginia also supported Roosevelt's re-election campaign in 1940, traveling in motorcades and giving a speech to the Harbor Club in Brooklyn, New York (a club that was "90 percent Wilkie").³²⁶ Despite her tireless efforts, Virginia did have doubts about her work on occasion. Her activities caused her to rethink her beliefs about society and race that constituted her upbringing. Virginia expressed her uneasiness to Frank Graham - "I have never been so unable to see or think clearly as I am now. It is an uncharted sea—and I feel lost upon it."³²⁷ At times, Virginia felt unable to continue the battle. Maury Maverick warned Virginia not to "sacrifice everything" for a poll-tax fight.³²⁸

Despite Virginia's reservations, she continued with her work with the NCAPT, which had been formed by 1941. It thrust Virginia into a new position. Durr helped

³²³ Ibid., 58, 92.

³²⁴ Myles Horton to Virginia Durr, 3 September 1942, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 4.

³²⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 133-34.

³²⁶ Mrs. Charles Poletti and Mrs. Eliot D. Pratt to Virginia Durr, 15 November 1940, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 4; Pearl S. Grobet to Virginia Durr, 31 October 1940, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 4.

³²⁷ Virginia Foster Durr to Frank Graham, October 1940, MJ Papers, box 5, folder 15.5.7.

³²⁸ Maury Maverick to Virginia Durr, 2 January 1941, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 6.

organize the National Anti-Poll Tax Week, sponsored by the SCHW and the NCAPT. She also worked diligently to try and get NCAPT publications out to supporters and hopeful donors. The NCAPT's, as well as that of the SCHW, primary method of operation was that of the traditional type—sending out pamphlets, establishing meetings and committees, sending out speakers, and lobbying, for the direct-action form of activism had not yet begun.³²⁹ While effective in promoting education about the problems of the poll tax, the methods also proved expensive, particularly for an organization relying on donations.

International crisis soon shadowed domestic issues like the poll tax in late 1941. In one December morning, the isolationists' hopes shattered, as Japanese attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor. The following day, Roosevelt asked Congress for a declaration of war, thrusting the United States into its second world war in less than thirty years.

³²⁹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 150; Eleanor Bontecou to Virginia Durr, 5 July 1941, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 6; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, xii.

CHAPTER V

THE WAR YEARS

The ‘sleeping giant’ had opened its eyes before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Although not fully awake, under Roosevelt and his administration, the United States undertook war preparations before December of 1941. While the economy and industry remained depressed, behind the scenes, government was working to gear the economy for war production. At FDR’s request, Congress appropriated \$1 billion for the construction of airplanes in May of 1940.³³⁰ Clifford Durr was at the forefront of mobilization before Pearl Harbor and recalled that “if America had not been attacked and had never entered the war, all of us would have been guilty of having thrown away billions of America’s dollars.”³³¹

In 1940, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation created the Defense Plant Corporation (DPC), whose purpose was to build manufacturing plants and lease those plants to private companies, or to operate the plants through management contracts. The DPC was primarily the brainchild of Clifford Durr, who got the chairman of the RFC, Emil Schram, on board. While most of the DPC funds went to already industrialized areas—Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Detroit—some of the money went to

³³⁰ Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986), 5.

³³¹ “Alabaman Filling Important Niche in Government Setup,” *Birmingham News-Herald*, 1 September 1946, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 4.

undeveloped regions, such as Texas, California, and the Northwest. Consequently, the DPC helped to break the industrial concentration in the East.³³²

By 1941, Cliff Durr was one of the Corporation's directors. Constantly at odds with former RFC director Jesse Jones, Durr worked fervently to try and prevent the DPC from fostering large private-sector profits from public money.³³³ Durr "fought as hard as he could to ensure that, in its operation, the public interest, as he had come to see it, remained paramount."³³⁴ Some New Dealers, like Clifford Durr, feared that the war-time mobilization would increase the profits of businessmen, and particularly, increase monopolies, for the business community had a relatively "free hand" in mobilizing to win the war. His struggle was not in vain, for the DPC did not come entirely under the control of private business. Yet, by 1941, he could no longer endure the fight and accepted an appointment to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).³³⁵

In October of that year, Roosevelt appointed Durr as a member of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). His appointment had more to do with Alabama politics than with his experience and qualifications in the field of public communications. Nevertheless, Durr accepted the appointment. During the war, Cliff worked diligently to assure the airwaves offered educational and community-based programs. After the war, he attempted to keep free space from monopolies for those returning GIs who wished to go into broadcasting.³³⁶ By the time he resigned in 1947, Durr "had become clearly

³³² Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 60-71; "Alabaman Filling Important Niche,"; Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 342.

³³³ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 60-71.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

³³⁵ Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 175-76, Winkler, *Home Front*, 13; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 69-70.

³³⁶ "The Day in Washington," *New York Times*, 14 October 1941, 4; "The Day in Washington," *New York Times*, 29 October 1941, 2; Clifford J. Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 5;

identified as the leading spokesman for the public interest in radio.”³³⁷ Other New Dealers and friends of the Durrs supported Cliff’s appointment. Lyndon Johnson, then in the House of Representatives, wrote Roosevelt exclaiming, “dozens of hard-working, patriotic, little-fellows all over town were very happy this morning when they waked [sic] up and read that you had appointed Clifford Durr to the Communications Commission.”³³⁸

While Cliff worked to make the airwaves publicly responsible, Virginia continued her social activism and increased her expanding household. Sometime during the 1930s, Virginia became friends with Mike and Binny Straight, who owned the *New Republic*. She had met the Straights at a dinner party given by Mrs. Pinchott for the Spanish Relief Committee, an organization in which Virginia was active, although she also enjoyed the high dining at the Pinchotts. Through the Straights, she met a young English couple, Decca and Esmond Romilly.³³⁹

Jessica Mitford-Romilly, known as Decca, came from an eccentric aristocratic family. During the 1930s, the Mitford girls kept the news corps busy with their unconventional behavior. Diana Mitford married British fascist leader Oswald Mosley, and Unity Mitford adored Adolph Hitler and followed him around Germany during the late 1930s. Decca, who referred to her entire family as “the Nazis,” was rebellious and independent and shocked the family by marrying Esmond Romilly, a relative of Winston Churchill’s and a political leftist. In 1937 Romilly traveled to Spain to fight against Franco. Ostracized by family and needing work, the Romillys moved to New York, and

Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 73-79; “Alabaman Filling Important Niche;” for an extensive look at Durr’s work in the FCC, see Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 72-97.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

³³⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson to Franklin Roosevelt, 14 October 1941, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 4.

³³⁹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 135-138.

then Washington D.C. in 1939, where they grafted themselves into powerful and wealthy circles.³⁴⁰

The Romillys first met the Durrs at a breakfast attended by Washington New Dealers. Decca recalled her first meeting with Virginia Durr:

I sat next to a tall Southern woman in a white hat. She introduced herself to me as Virginia Durr. She spoke in a sort of soft scream, happily devoid of the slight whine I had come to associate with Southern voices. Her approach to conversation was that of a frontal attack. . . .Mrs. Durr made me feel outnumbered, as though I were being cornered by a roomful of reporters.³⁴¹

Decca did not care for Virginia initially and felt her personality too confrontational and a stark contrast to the subdued British gentry with whom she was accustomed.

Nevertheless, the Romillys accepted a dinner invitation to the Durrs' home. Decca recalled that, upon their arrival, they found Virginia "screaming softly into the telephone," and the house full of children. Durr told the children to stay quiet so that she could talk to the grown-ups; however, the dinner party soon realized that the baby had been crying for some time—Virginia abruptly exclaimed, "My lands! We forgot to feed Baby Sister!"³⁴² Decca became both amused and intrigued by Virginia.

Any wariness Decca had about the Durrs quickly disappeared. She found Virginia full of "overpowering charm," and Cliff a "softened edition of Abe Lincoln."³⁴³

³⁴⁰ Mary S. Lovell, *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2001), 237-238, 283. It was widely circulated that Unity Mitford and Hitler were lovers.

³⁴¹ Jessica Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 3d ed. (New York: Orion Books, 2000), 204-205.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 206; see also Jessica Mitford, *Daughters and Rebels: The Autobiography of Jessica Mitford* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960).

³⁴³ Mitford, *Hons*, 205.

Decca became enchanted with Virginia, and by the end of the evening, they had become close friends. Decca marveled at how quickly their friendship formed, unlike in England, where it could take months or even years to feel comfortable around another couple.³⁴⁴ The admiration went both ways. Enthralled by Esmond's fighting in Spain, a cause she felt strongly about, Virginia described Esmond as "the world's most marvelous young man," and Esmond quickly dubbed Virginia "Old Virginny."³⁴⁵

After a time in Miami, Florida, Decca and Esmond returned to Washington, D.C., and Esmond enlisted in the Canadian Royal Air Force. After dinner one evening, Esmond asked Virginia if Decca could stay with them for the weekend while he was training. Although Virginia had plans to attend the Democratic National Convention, she agreed. Decca stayed with the Durrs for almost three years.³⁴⁶ According to Decca, the Durrs were at the center of all that was exciting about Washington, and they "radiated warmth and affection—qualities that seemed very important just then."³⁴⁷ While Virginia always suspected Esmond planned for Decca to live with them all along, the arrangement ultimately pleased Durr. She found Decca to be a "strictly high class English refugee with good connections. Best Mayfair Accent. All our acquaintances are green with envy."³⁴⁸ Decca's aristocratic background and manners garnered the admiration of Virginia, for Decca was the epitome of a 'lady.'

"Good God, what a household we were during the war!," was how Virginia described their home on Seminary Hill.³⁴⁹ In addition to Decca and her daughter,

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 206.

³⁴⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 138.

³⁴⁶ Lovell, *Sisters*, 317; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 140.

³⁴⁷ Mitford, *Hons*, 227.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.; Letter from Virginia Durr to Esmond Romilly, as cited in Lovell, *Sisters*, 342.

³⁴⁹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 145.

Virginia also took in her mother periodically, who suffered from melancholia and high blood pressure. Their full household undertook more strain, as Virginia agreed to add Lowell Mellett's Japanese butler, Yamasaki, and Yamasaki's wife and child. Mellett's position as a White House aide made it politically imprudent to have a Japanese butler in his home. While Yamasaki obtained a job as a butler next door, his wife, Saiko, stayed as on Decca's nanny.³⁵⁰ All of the children, including Yamasaki's son Hiroshi and Decca's daughter, called Cliff "daddy." Virginia laughingly recalled how Cliff "had a hard time explaining how he had a Japanese child and an English child and an American child all about the same age."³⁵¹ Two weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Durr family suffered a personal misfortune. Cliff's father, John Durr, died at the age of seventy eight. In a tragedy even closer to home, Esmond Romilly died in action shortly before Christmas of 1941. Decca remained at the Durrs's home for another six months before taking a job as a typist for the Office of Price Administration.³⁵²

Servants were essential to the Durrs' household. With a nurse, a cook, a yardman, and a wash woman all on the Durrs' payroll, Virginia maintained her activism, while caring for an expanding household. In later years, Virginia recognized the irony of the situation, as she fought to free other people, but used the labor of others in order to achieve it. For women, however, to be free, she concluded, they had to rely on someone else to do the "dirty work" at home.³⁵³ Virginia admitted that "I do feel that my political life was based on the black women and black men that provided the underpinning for my

³⁵⁰ Ibid.; Virginia Durr to Lucy J. Durr, 28 June 1940, DF Papers, box 5, folder 1; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 145-46.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 146.

³⁵² "John W. Durr is Dead at 78; Funeral Today," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 December 1941, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 4; Lovell, *Sisters*, 345.

³⁵³ Durr interview with Reed, 4.

life.”³⁵⁴ Although Virginia questioned the role black women played in providing for her life, she retained servants throughout her married life, until she could no longer afford them. It was perhaps a necessary evil that allowed Durr to participate in the world outside the home. Particularly important was the care for the children. Virginia’s daughter, Lucy, recalled that “she was constantly engaged, and, as you know, children are narcissistic, and they want what they want, and what they want most is their mother’s full attention. And we didn’t get that [laughs]. She was engaged with us, but there was always something she was working on.”³⁵⁵ If the Durr children resented their mother’s absence, they did not comment on it. Yet, Durr was certainly not a typical housewife who concerned her days with laundry, cooking, and the care of children.

The Durrs’ hectic family life never limited Virginia’s activism. When Esmond Romilly suggested Decca stay for the weekend at Seminary Hill, Virginia had plans to attend the 1940 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and did not want to take the pregnant Decca. Nevertheless, Virginia took Mitford along and introduced her to all her ‘Texas’ friends, namely Maury Maverick and Lyndon Johnson. Nauseous from the pregnancy, Decca accepted when Maury Maverick gallantly offered his hat to use in case her sickness should occur during the convention. Virginia and her friends jokingly claimed it was the Democratic donkey kicking up its heels that caused Decca’s illness. When Decca gave birth in February of 1941, she christened the baby Constancia; yet, the baby became universally known as “Dinky-donk,” or “the Donk.”³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 5.

³⁵⁵ Lucy Durr Hackney, interview with author.

³⁵⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 139; Jessica Mitford, “Raising Hell on the Home Front,” *Washington Post*, 2 October 1977, 296; Lovell, *Sisters*, 337-338; Jessica Mitford, *A Fine Old Conflict* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 23.

While the Democratic committee planned the party's platform for the 1940 campaign, the Democratic women's advisory committee made its own recommendations. Attended by more than four hundred women, including Virginia Durr, the delegates slated their proposals to a committee of eighteen women in charge of presenting them to the Convention. Continuing the social welfare programs of the New Deal was the primary theme of the "fourteen points" presented to delegates. More specifically, the women endorsed an isolationist stand on the war in Europe, an expansion of civil liberties, a committee to oversee a program to end unemployment, and the abolition of the poll tax.³⁵⁷ Virginia's tireless politicking perhaps played a pivotal role in adding the poll tax resolution to the recommendations.

Few were surprised when Senator Lister Hill nominated Franklin Roosevelt, who did not attend the convention, for an unprecedented third term. However, tensions exploded when Roosevelt announced his choice for Vice-Presidential running-mate, Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace. Wallace, an unequivocal supporter of FDR, was one of the "primary architects of the New Deal and its foremost propagandist."³⁵⁸ Roosevelt's choice of Wallace stemmed from both political and personal motivation. Wallace, who supported a fight against fascism, could help FDR obtain much needed support from the isolationist farm states. In addition, Wallace's loyalty and his populist ideas gained him favor with the President. Yet, Wallace's sympathies with organized labor, the poor, and African Americans marked him as an unthinkable candidate to Southern conservatives. Although Wallace's farm programs may have aided in increased farm production during the 1930s, they were not popular among many rural politicians.

³⁵⁷ "Party's Women Speak Up: Keep New Deal Laws," *Chicago Tribune*, 14 July 1940, 2.

³⁵⁸ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 175.

Amid boos, hisses, and jeers upon Wallace's nomination, Roosevelt let it be known that he would not seek a third term unless the Democrats accepted Wallace.³⁵⁹

Not all Southerners opposed Wallace. Virginia Durr was one of the few delegates who did not balk at his nomination. Wallace, during the late 1930s and early 1940s, represented the intellectual voice of the Roosevelt administration and expressed the idealistic goals of the New Deal. Wallace counted Claude Pepper, who was about to embark on the anti-poll tax campaign, among his supporters in Washington. Virginia saw in Wallace a fellow traveler, one who would fight for the underprivileged and the poor, for whom principles outweighed political gain. Even outright party hostility failed to daunt Wallace.³⁶⁰ After Wallace's nomination, Virginia "marched in his parade and waved [her] cornstalk. It was great fun."³⁶¹ With Roosevelt focused on the war in Europe, Durr had found a new champion for the continuation of New Deal policies and ideas in Henry Wallace.

Before December of 1941, both Cliff and Virginia were decidedly interventionist. They both had sympathies for England. Virginia had studied English history, Cliff attended Oxford, and, with Jessica Romilly living with them, they firmly had support for Great Britain. In addition, Virginia abhorred fascism. Although Virginia's political ideas during the 1930s do not seem entirely established, she feared right-winged extremism and

³⁵⁹ James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1956), 428-429; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 177; Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 149-150; "Seek Further Delay on Poll Tax Fight," *New York Times*, 15 April 1944, 13; "President Irked as Convention Boos Wallace," *Chicago Tribune*, 19 July 1940, 6; "Bolt Wallace in Louisiana," *Chicago Tribune*, 21 July 1940, 1; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 77, 317.

³⁶⁰ John B. Judis, *Grand Illusion: Critics and Champions of the American Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Company, 1992), 47; John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 446; "Wallace Tries to Laugh Off Party Revolt," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 July 1940, 2.

³⁶¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 139.

militarism. Amid a cozy, peaceful Virginia winter, with snow on the ground and tea on the table, the Durrs learned of the bombing of Pearl Harbor.³⁶²

It was also during 1941 that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), under the Hatch Act, began to closely monitor the Durrs. During the late 1930s, FDR greatly expanded the role of the FBI in monitoring political activities both on the right, as well as on the left. J. Edgar Hoover, however, viewed the order as a blank slate to use broad powers at his discretion.³⁶³ According to David Cauter, Hoover “became a state within a state; politically sacrosanct, he made the FBI his own private army. . . . dedicated to the cult of his personality.”³⁶⁴ By 1942, the Bureau listed forty-seven groups as ‘subversive’ and gave the list to the Attorney General, Francis Biddle. Among those listed were many organizations in which Virginia was active.

Although Virginia believed the monitoring began when the Japanese butler moved into their home, the FBI files indicate that the Japanese family was the least of the Justice Department’s concerns. Virginia’s relationship to Hugo Black and her involvement in various “alleged front” organizations in Washington brought her to the attention of the FBI.³⁶⁵ The initial investigation began when the FBI became aware that Virginia might have added her signature on a petition to include a member of the Communist Party on an election ballot. Although the FBI appears never to have determined her guilt on the ballot issue, their investigation brought to light the many ‘subversive’ groups in which Virginia was active, among those the SCHW, the NCAPT,

³⁶² Ibid., 142-43.

³⁶³ Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 51, 55.

³⁶⁴ David Cauter, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 113.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 146; S.K. McKee to Director of Federal Bureau of Investigation, 14 August 1941, VFD FBI file.

the American Youth Congress, the Washington Committee for Democratic Action, the American Spanish Relief Committee, and the League of Women Shoppers.³⁶⁶

According to Virginia, the FBI appeared at their house almost daily during the war. She recalled, “By that time, I took it casually. The children would cry out, ‘Mother, the milkman’s here!’, ‘Mother, the laundry man’s here!’, ‘Mother, the FBI’s here!’”.³⁶⁷

Virginia believed that the FBI’s primary interest was in Decca, and that their leftist boarder made the Durrs suspect. However, in the early years of the 1940s, the FBI investigation never mentioned Decca Mitford-Romilly in the Durr investigations; their own activities made them suspect.³⁶⁸

Clifford Durr did not share his wife’s placidity about the FBI surveillance. Cliff’s investigation by the FBI was much more extensive, due to his position in Washington. Durr came to the attention of the FBI, when, as a commissioner in the FCC, he was reported to have been a member of the American Peace Mobilization. An agent interviewed Cliff at his office at the FCC. During the interview, Cliff politely, but emphatically, denied being a member of the American Peace Mobilization or any other ‘subversive’ organization.³⁶⁹ While the FBI never determined his membership in the group, the Bureau continued closely to monitor Cliff, as well as Virginia. Despite their

³⁶⁶ Report on Mrs. Clifford Judkins Durr, 31 May 1943, VFD FBI files, 1; “Memorandum for Mr. Tamm,” 13 July 1943, VFD FBI files, 1; for a more detailed look at the ‘subversive’ activities of the League of Women Shoppers, see Lawrence B. Glickman, “The Stike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth-Century American Political Culture,” *Journal of American History* 88 (June 2001): 99-128.

³⁶⁷ Studs Terkel, *“The Good War”*: *An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 335; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 146; Virginia recalled an instance when the FBI came to their house to search through Yamasaki’s belongings. All they found were pornographic pictures in the bottom of his trunk. Yamasaki was embarrassed and his wife was a little angry (Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 146-47).

³⁶⁸ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 147-48; “Report of H.I. Bobbitt to Director, FBI,” 31 May 1943, VFD FBI files, 1-4.

³⁶⁹ S.K. McKee to P.E. Foxworth, 12 August 1941, *Clifford Judkins Durr*, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C. [hereafter CJD FBI files].

professional differences, Jesse Jones, former RFC director, defended Durr to the Justice Department as a “loyal patriotic American” who did not require a Bureau investigation.³⁷⁰ Cliff Durr, a lifelong defender of the Constitution and civil liberties, always remained troubled by the investigation. Later in life he wrote,

It is hard to be sure wether [sic] the F.B.I. investigated me because I was a suspicious character or wether [sic] I became a suspicious character because I was investigated by the F.B.I. Perhaps I became suspect because I married my wife, or she [may] have become suspect because she married me. Was my wife subversive because she participated in the fight for abolition of the poll tax. . .or was the fight for the abolition of the subversive activity because my wife participated in it?³⁷¹

Regardless of the reasons, the FBI surveillance of the Durrs continued until the 1960s.

Due to rationing, Virginia curtailed her work with the NCAPT, or at least, her trips to Washington. In order to get to Washington to work, she had to ride in the carpool, usually sitting on the knees of Kenneth Galbraith, which were “very boney.”³⁷² Virginia continued in her tireless efforts to get support to end the poll tax—“all during the war, we kept the poll-tax fight going, though everybody was completely absorbed elsewhere.”³⁷³ After the death of Congressman Geyer, Jennings Perry, editor of the *Nashville Tennessean*, assumed the chairmanship of the NCAPT. While the SCHW was a member of the committee, the formation of the NCAPT made it a separate entity. By

³⁷⁰ “Statement of Clifford Judkins Durr to Special Agent [name unknown],” 12 March 1943, CJD FBI files; James Lawrence Fly to J. Edgar Hoover, 6 April 1942, CJD FBI files; Jesse H. Jones to Matthew F. McGuire, 8 September 1941, CJD FBI files.

³⁷¹ Clifford J. Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 4.

³⁷² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 151.

³⁷³ Terkel, “*Good War*”, 334.

1942, the NCAPT had the support of more than sixty five organizations, including the NAACP.³⁷⁴ According to Durr, “the poll tax committee had simply gotten bigger than the Southern Conference.”³⁷⁵ While the SCHW focused on problems in the South, the NCAPT made voting rights a national issue.

Before his death in October of 1941, Congressman Geyer started a petition to get his anti-poll tax bill out of the House Judiciary Committee where it had stalled. Undoubtedly, the campaign for signatures involved Virginia. Perhaps most involved in obtaining the signatures was New York congressman Vito Marcantonio, a labor supporter who was elected on the American Labor Party ticket. In September of 1942, the required two-hundred eighteen signatures were obtained, discharging the bill to the House, where it came up for a vote. Simultaneously, Claude Pepper, who “assumed the role of the Southern conscience in the Senate,” put his anti-poll tax bill before the Senate.³⁷⁶ Yet, the Soldier-Vote Bill, which would allow service men and women the ability to vote in federal elections, temporarily overshadowed both bills.³⁷⁷

In September of 1942, the House approved the Soldiers Vote Bill, enfranchising men and women in the armed services. While Southern opposition in the House was intense, the bill faced further opposition when the bill reached the Senate. Claude Pepper and Illinois Senator C. Wayland Brooks added an amendment suspending the payment of poll taxes for the duration of the war, sparking heated debate by Southern congressmen.

³⁷⁴ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 69, 73; National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax letterhead, SCEF Papers, box 11, folder 126; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Co., Inc., 1997), 9.

³⁷⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 153.

³⁷⁶ Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 126.

³⁷⁷ Alan Schaffer, *Vito Marcantonio: Radical in Congress* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 118; “House Will Vote on Poll-Tax Bill,” *New York Times*, 23 September 1942, 16; “The Day in Washington,” *New York Times*, 31 July 1942, 4; “Poll Tax Delays Soldier Vote Bill,” *New York Times*, 25 August 1942, 13; “Would Abolish Poll Tax,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1942, 9.

Senators Lister Hill from Alabama and Tom Connolly from Texas led the opposition, arguing that states maintained the right to impose voting restrictions, and Georgian Walter George threatened a filibuster. Nevertheless, the Soldier Vote Bill passed the Senate, by a margin of 47-5.³⁷⁸ It was one of the few triumphs for the NCAPT.³⁷⁹

However, the bill of 1942 served to prevent voting by the armed services, rather than promoting it. The administrative process of distributing forty-eight different ballots resulted in a scant 28,000 soldiers casting their votes out of almost 11 million. In 1943, the Green-Lucas Bill came before the Senate, which would use one ballot for the service men and women in federal elections and would suspend the poll tax in federal elections. Virginia courted the aid of Eleanor Roosevelt who supported the soldier's voting bill. Durr and the NCAPT also wanted to add veterans to the act, but failed to get them included. In response to the Green-Lucas Bill, Senators James Eastland (MS), Kenneth McKellar (TN), and John McClellan (AR) offered a moderate version of the bill which, in essence, preserved the status quo. Backed by Republicans, who saw the Green-Lucas Bill as providing military votes for Roosevelt, Eastland's bill passed. The implications over voting rights for the military were clear. Both opponents and supporters of the bills recognized that its passage was a stepping stone to repealing the poll tax.³⁸⁰

The Senate debate over the Soldier Vote Bill was moderate compared to the ensuing battle over the Geyer-Pepper poll tax bill. According to Claude Pepper, Southern senators chose not to filibuster the Soldier Vote Bill because "they knew that such a

³⁷⁸ "Urge Repeal of Vote Poll-Tax," *New York Times*, 27 August 1942, 38; "Soldier Vote Bill Accepted by the House," *New York Times*, 9 September 1942, 23; "Poll Tax Delays Soldier Vote Bill," *New York Times*, 25 August 1942, 13; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 116; "Senate Passes Bill for Soldier Vote," *New York Times*, 26 September 1942, 22.

³⁷⁹ In 1943, Tennessee repealed its poll tax, followed by Georgia in 1945. The efforts of the NCAPT and its national focus on the poll tax was partly responsible for the repeals.

³⁸⁰ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 129-130; Virginia Durr to Eleanor Roosevelt, 20 October 1943, series 100, ER Papers; Eleanor Roosevelt to Virginia Durr, 26 October 1943, series 100, ER Papers.

course would place them in a bad light. They preferred to save their powder for [the Geyer-Pepper] bill.”³⁸¹ In October of 1942, the House passed the Geyer bill, moving the bill onto the Senate, where Claude Pepper and George Norris of Nebraska sponsored its passage. The Geyer-Pepper bill did not outlaw the poll tax at the state and local level, only in federal elections; nevertheless, Southerners ardently defended ‘states rights’ and condemned the alleged unconstitutionality of the bill.³⁸² In order to prevent a quorum, Southern senators failed to show up for sessions, prompting Vice-President Wallace to sign arrest warrants for eight of the senators. A sergeant at arms arrested Senator McKellar his hotel room and escorted him to the Senate.³⁸³ With a quorum finally established, the filibuster on the poll tax began led by Theodore Bilbo from Mississippi.

The eight day filibuster, led by Theodore Bilbo and James Connolly, served to shelve effectively the legislation until the next congressional session. FDR failed to defend openly the anti-poll tax measure, telling reporters he knew nothing about the filibuster and was unfamiliar with the poll tax fight.³⁸⁴ FDR, for his part, “left his supporters dangling out on a limb.”³⁸⁵ During the course of the filibuster, Bilbo assured his colleagues that “no member of the Senate is a better friend of the Negro than am I,” yet, “these radical, off-brands, pinks, organizations, unions, politicians” are attempting to “force this legislation before we are ripe for it.”³⁸⁶ Bilbo then proceeded to outline his

³⁸¹ Claude Pepper, “A Plea for Democracy: The Anti-Poll Tax Bill,” speech before the United States Senate, 21 November 1942, SCEF Papers, box 4, folder 84, 10.

³⁸² Mark Sullivan, “Anti-Poll Tax Drive Described as Move Against States’ Rights,” *Washington Post*, 16 May 1943, B-7; “Facts about the Poll Tax,” *New York Times*, 15 October 1942, 22; “Senators Report Curb on Poll Tax,” *New York Times*, 27 October 1942, 21.

³⁸³ “Arrests Compel Senate Quorum,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1942, 1.

³⁸⁴ C.P. Trussell, “Poll Tax Repeal Virtually Dead as Senators Move Closure Vote,” *New York Times*, 21 November 1942, 1.

³⁸⁵ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 70.

³⁸⁶ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 77th Congress, 2d sess., 1942, 8955, 8961.

plan to send all willing African Americans to Liberia.³⁸⁷ Many liberals began to term Bilbo's ranting and racism as the "Bilbonic Plague."³⁸⁸ Senator Russell, also from Mississippi, claimed that Earl Browder, head of the Communist Party, was behind the anti-poll tax legislation.³⁸⁹ At the end of the filibuster, Virginia wrote Corliss Lamont, "I am feeling disgusted after being beat by the Filibuster. It was really a simply sickening thing to watch. To see the Senate of the U.S. give into it was very ominous I thought for the future."³⁹⁰

The battle over the poll tax in 1942 was only round one of what would be an almost decade-long struggle to get the bill passed in the Senate. Lister Hill declared on the Senate floor, "we have sought to carry our plan and have stood fixed and steadfast in our determination that the bill should be defeated."³⁹¹ Virginia wrote sponsors of the NCAPT, claiming that the "undemocratic filibuster" actually won the organization increasing support.³⁹² In May of 1943, the House of Representatives again passed the anti-poll tax bill, this time introduced by New York Congressman, Vito Marcantonio. Racially liberal, Marcantonio sought election to Congress on the Democratic, the Republican, and the American Labor Party tickets. Early in the war, Marcantonio fought for racial equality in government-supported war agencies. Marcantonio antagonized Southern congressmen because of his support of civil rights and labor unions; in fact, the New York congressman may have been more of a liability to the poll tax repeal, as, by the mid-1940s, his name was synonymous with 'Communism.'³⁹³

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 8956-8957.

³⁸⁸ Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 118.

³⁸⁹ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 77th Congress, 2d sess., 1942, 8903.

³⁹⁰ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 28 November 1942, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178.

³⁹¹ *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 2d session, 1942, 88, pt. 9044.

³⁹² Virginia Durr to 'Sponsor,' 6 January 1943, MJ Papers, box 5, folder 15.5.7.

³⁹³ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 71.

Believing that a Republican would have a better chance at getting it passed, Virginia did not initially favor the Marcantonio Bill, and instead, chose to court the aid of Republican Joseph Clark Baldwin.³⁹⁴ Virginia and Eleanor Bontecou visited Marcantonio's office to try and persuade him to withdraw his bill and support Baldwin. According to Virginia, "Vesuvius erupted. . . .He sprang up and you never heard such a tirade in your life!"³⁹⁵ Faced with Marcantonio's relentlessness on the bill, the NCAPT was forced to "eat crow" and abandon Baldwin in favor of Marcantonio. Through her work with Marcantonio on the bill, Virginia established a close friendship with the representative, as well as with his wife Miriam.³⁹⁶ Durr said of Marcantonio, "I never had a closer, sweeter, or dearer friend in my life than Marcantonio and he would have died for free speech."³⁹⁷ Yet, the connection of Marcantonio, "portrayed to the public as a Russian sympathizer," with the poll tax repeal, "alienated the liberals from the NCAPT."³⁹⁸

The continuing threat of filibuster loomed over the Marcantonio bill in the Senate. This time Claude Pepper did not take up the fight. Jennings Perry hinted that Pepper felt "he has done his part."³⁹⁹ In his stead, Senator James Mead took charge of the bill in the Senate. Although Marcantonio claimed his bill was identical to the one passed by the House in 1942, the Senate Judiciary Committee bottled up the legislation for months.⁴⁰⁰ Virginia worked diligently to get the head of the Judiciary Committee, Frederick Van

³⁹⁴ Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers box 26, folder 360; Schaffer, *Vito Marcantonio*, 118-119; "Senate Body Votes Anti-Poll Tax Bill," *New York Times*, 13 November 1943, 7.

³⁹⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 161.

³⁹⁶ "Senate Body Votes"; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 160-161, 168-170.

³⁹⁷ Durr, interview by Thrasher and Hall, 177.

³⁹⁸ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 83.

³⁹⁹ Jennings Perry to Virginia Durr, 29 May 1943, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 8.

⁴⁰⁰ "O'Mahoney Loses New Poll-Tax Step," *New York Times*, 16 November 1943, 25; "Senators to Weigh Poll Tax Off Floor," *New York Times*, 28 September 1943, 31.

Nuys, to support the bill and told Mrs. Roosevelt that “he has promised to do everything in his power to help us.”⁴⁰¹ Nevertheless, Southern senators proved good on their threat to filibuster once again. Theodore Bilbo charged supporters of the bill with irresponsibility, claiming the debate was taking away from important war-related matters.⁴⁰²

The filibuster started in 1943 threatened to resume in the new session of 1944. Once again, Theodore Bilbo led the fight. His racist remarks gave Washington “a pain in the stomach,” as he proclaimed that the “white man is the custodian of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” and that Southerners needed to tell their “Negro-loving Yankee friends to go straight to hell.”⁴⁰³ Tennessee Senator Kenneth McKellar focused his venom at Jennings Perry, calling both Perry and his newspaper “communist.”⁴⁰⁴ The Senate tabled the anti-poll tax bill; however, Vito Marcantonio vowed to re-introduce the bill in the next Congress. The NCAPT consistently attacked the argument that the Southern senators represented the South as a whole. In an editorial to the *New York Times*, Jennings Perry argued, “may I caution against easy acceptance of the views of a few magnolia-scented senators as the ‘view of the South’. The South will be able to make known its view only when it shall have regained its voice at the polls.”⁴⁰⁵ Virginia worked diligently behind the scenes in the NCAPT office and flattering congressmen, if necessary. By early 1943, Virginia Durr was already feeling the strain of the fight. She wrote to Jim Dombrowski,

⁴⁰¹ Virginia Durr to Eleanor Roosevelt, 20 October 1943, ER Papers, series 100.

⁴⁰² “Senate Body Votes.”

⁴⁰³ “His Honor Speaks,” *Time*, 3 April 1944, 21.

⁴⁰⁴ “Closure on Debate on Poll Tax Passed,” *New York Times*, 12 May 1944, 1.

⁴⁰⁵ Jennings Perry, “Poll Tax is Opposed,” *New York Times*, 7 May 1944, E8.

“I feel all my springs have run dry—I suppose it is a natural reaction after the hard fight I was in all Fall.”⁴⁰⁶

Marcantonio did introduce a new bill, which the House subsequently passed. Faced with yet another filibuster, the repeal supporters hoped to wear out the debate.⁴⁰⁷ Durr continued to remain hopeful, though naïve. In September of 1945, she told the executive board of the NCAPT, “this is the first year I really think we will win because our foreign policy is to fight for free elections. That is our key rallying cry, and when it comes up before the Senate, if they vote it down it is ridiculous.”⁴⁰⁸ However idealistic, their tenacity was apparently affecting Theodore Bilbo, as he took the occasion to write letters to both James Dombrowski and Clark Foreman, denouncing the SCHW as a “mongrel organization that is to say a communistic front that has no other purpose on earth except to bring about social equality between the white and the black races . . . and thereby destroy the white race.” He concluded by stating that the SCHW was the “Number One Enemy of the South.”⁴⁰⁹ The SCHW was not the only victim of his tirade. The NCAPT’s poll tax fight was “crackpot legislation,” filled with “communistic concepts of government,” which threatened the “American ideals and the American way of life.”⁴¹⁰

Virginia worked tirelessly on the poll tax fight.⁴¹¹ She struggled with guilt over working so hard at the expense of her children, and Cliff came to believe that the poll tax had become her obsession. In addition to courting members of Congress, she drew up

⁴⁰⁶ Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, 10 February 1942, SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360.

⁴⁰⁷ “Poll Tax Battle to be Fought Over,” *New York Times*, 14 January 1945, B10.

⁴⁰⁸ Meeting of Executive Board, minutes, 14 September 1945, MJ Papers, box 5, folder 15.5.9, 4.

⁴⁰⁹ Theodore Bilbo to James Dombrowski, 5 November 1945, SCEF Papers, box 139, folder 2632.

⁴¹⁰ Theo G. Bilbo to Clark Foreman, 13 August 1945, SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 354.

⁴¹¹ Virginia Durr also sat on the board of the Southern Electoral Reform League. While she did not favor the group, she did support their efforts to get rid of the poll tax (Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 157).

case histories of voting records by Southern congressmen and aided in the publication of disseminated material, more than 96,000 pieces in 1943 alone, including “Why the Poll Tax is A National Issue: The Poll Tax Repeal Handbook.” The funding for the handbook left the NCAPT financially in the red, however. The FBI kept close watch on the NCAPT, often sending agents in to ‘volunteer’. Virginia welcomed them and put them to work on the mimeograph machine making thousands of copies. The agents rarely returned.⁴¹²

The NCAPT consistently linked the fight in Europe to the fight at home. Like the “Double V” campaign among African Americans, the NCAPT pointed to the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom abroad, when so many Americans remained disfranchised. According to James Dombrowski, “the hypocrisy of our making an issue of democratic elections abroad while retaining the price-tag on the ballot at home makes this a timely moment to press for action.”⁴¹³ The NCAPT clearly presented its backing for the war in Europe. Red baiting and ‘un-Americanism’ had tainted the committee enough already.⁴¹⁴ Virginia also attempted to get the Democratic Party to insert an anti-poll tax plank in its platform. Discouraged by FDR’s seemingly abandonment of the poll tax issue, she wrote, “I feel it is imperative that the President between now and November come out strongly in support of an anti-poll tax bill.”⁴¹⁵ Roosevelt did not heed Durr’s advice.

The Democratic Party did not, however, include an anti-poll tax plank in 1944. FDR, needing the support of Southern senators for the war effort, abandoned the poll tax

⁴¹²Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 157; Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360; “National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax: Summary of Activities,” 1943, ER Papers, series 100; Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 22 October 1943, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178; Durr, interview with Reed, 19-20.

⁴¹³ James Dombrowski, “Anti-Poll Tax Bill,” 1945, SCEF Papers, box 3, folder 47.

⁴¹⁴ “One War,” pamphlet, SCEF Papers, box 11, folder 126.

⁴¹⁵ Virginia Durr to Paul Porter, 25 September 1944, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 9.

struggle as early as 1941. Public opinion, like FDR, turned from domestic issues and New Deal programs to security and winning the war. In 1944, FDR was the choice for president, and the Party's platform was winning the war.⁴¹⁶ In 1941, Virginia recalled meeting Mrs. Roosevelt for tea at the White House to discuss the next step for the NCAPT. For a few moments, Eleanor retired to speak to the President. She returned, visibly upset, and told Virginia that FDR would not support any anti-poll tax legislation and that neither should she. Virginia claimed, "that's when he changed from Dr. New Deal to Dr. Win-the-War."⁴¹⁷ White House support for the NCAPT was finished. I.F. Stone's column, which Virginia read frequently, criticized Roosevelt's stand: "Mr. Roosevelt has been executing a series of strategic retreats. . . .the White House has passed the word along to soft-pedal the fight against the poll tax. . . . progressives must lead the President if he is unwilling or unable to lead them."⁴¹⁸ Durr was also concerned that black Democratic support was waning, and that African Americans were joining the ranks of the Republican Party. She wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt, informing her that she felt African Americans were frustrated with Southern senators' reactionary tactics. And without explicitly stating it, they were also frustrated with Roosevelt's lack of support for their causes. One proposed solution was to encourage Claude Pepper, as a Southerner, to once again take up the poll tax fight.⁴¹⁹

By 1946, the poll tax issue had lost its imperative for many liberals, as the post-war world and the emerging Cold War began to take center stage. Virginia wrote to

⁴¹⁶ Markowitz, *Rise and Fall*, 82-83.

⁴¹⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 158; Durr, Reed interview, 16; the reference to "Dr.-Win-the-War" came from a press conference in which FDR claimed that "Dr. New Deal" was no longer relevant to the times, and Dr. Win-the-War had emerged in his stead.

⁴¹⁸ I.F. Stone, "Capital Notes," *The Nation*, 23 January 1943, 115.

⁴¹⁹ Virginia Durr to Eleanor Roosevelt, 25 September 1944, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 9; Virginia Durr to Claude Pepper, 3 October 1944, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 9.

Beanie Baldwin, “everybody is for us in principle but no one will fight for us—and so there we are.”⁴²⁰ Although the House again passed an anti-poll tax bill, introduced by George Bender, the Senate did not take up the debate until 1948, where once again it was defeated by filibuster.⁴²¹ To Virginia, the poll tax fight was becoming a “farce.”⁴²² Southern Democrats, “had demonstrated their ability to kill any program and defeat any bill that remotely challenged the political status quo in the South.”⁴²³ According to Virginia Durr, “I will say this for my fellow Southerners, as wrong headed, prejudiced, and reactionary as they are, they do have persistence and a fighting spirit, although for all the wrong things.”⁴²⁴ In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, Virginia fumed, “our democratic process is being defied by a small group of men who, whatever they may say, do not know the meaning in practice of democracy.”⁴²⁵ Furthermore, Truman’s stand on the poll tax remained elusive, and they no longer had Eleanor Roosevelt, always in their corner, in the White House.⁴²⁶ The NCAPT suffered a further blow in 1946, when the SCHW informed the organization that they could no longer support the group financially. The organization would reconsider its funding, when, and if, “the poll tax again becomes urgent.”⁴²⁷ It was undoubtedly a blow to Virginia who felt that the poll

⁴²⁰ Virginia Durr to Beanie Baldwin, 29 October 1945, C.B. Baldwin Papers, series I, box 5, Special Collections, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

⁴²¹ “Southerners Win in Poll Tax Fight,” *New York Times*, 5 August 1948, 1.

⁴²² Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], Summer 1946, VFD Schlesinger Papers. box 2, folder 124.

⁴²³ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 131.

⁴²⁴ Virginia Durr to Aubrey Williams, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946.

⁴²⁵ “Letters to the Editor,” *Washington Post*, 22 January 1946, 6.

⁴²⁶ “Anti-Poll Tax Bill Adopted by House by Vote of 290-112,” *New York Times*, 22 July 1947, 1; “Truman on the Poll Tax,” *Washington Post*, 12 April 1946, 6.

⁴²⁷ James Dombrowski to Jennings Perry, 6 December 1946, SCEF Papers, box 24, folder 317.

tax was the pressing political issue of the period. Financial problems and Southern resistance took its toll on the NCAPT, and it “struggled along” until 1949.⁴²⁸

Amid the poll tax struggle, Virginia continued to sit on the executive committee of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, as well as acting as chairman for the Virginia Committee of the SCHW. The SCHW of the 1940s, however, had refined its focus since 1938. By the end of World War II, the New Deal criticism of corporate capitalism subsided. Liberalism changed, moving away from critiques of capitalism to a push for social justice.⁴²⁹ The SCHW proved an example of the changing focus of liberalism. By the mid-1940s, Durr claimed that “the emphasis in the Southern Conference had gone from labor to the war and then to race.”⁴³⁰ Initially started to address the economic limitations of the South, the SCHW began attacking the social concern that most members felt retarded Southern society—racism. The liberalism that emerged out of the New Deal era differed from that unleashed in 1933. According to Allan Brinkley, “the new liberalism that evolved in response to this changing world wrapped itself in the mantle of the New Deal, but bore only a partial resemblance to the ideas that had shaped the original New Deal.”⁴³¹ Yet, if the New Deal was effectively over by 1938, its impact was just beginning to be felt, particularly by African Americans, the Democratic Party, and the South.⁴³²

In 1942, the SCHW held its third convention in Nashville. No longer did arguments focus on foreign policy, as the SCHW was relatively united behind the war.

⁴²⁸ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 76. Claude Pepper assumed the leadership of the NCAPT in 1949, but it was plagued with lack of funds and red-baiting and was never again as effective as it was during the war years (Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 76).

⁴²⁹ Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 7-9.

⁴³⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 153.

⁴³¹ Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 4.

⁴³² Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 101.

The theme of the conference, “The South’s Part in Winning the War for Democracy,” demonstrated the SCHW’s unqualified support for the war.⁴³³ Due to the FBI investigation, and his position in Washington, Clifford Durr refused to participate in a panel discussion. He told Dombrowski, “as you know, my wife and I are dangerous people. . .so it won’t do such a respectable organization as the Southern Conference any good to have me around.”⁴³⁴

By the 1942 meeting, the SCHW had undergone a series of administrative changes. Due to personal differences with Myles Horton, James Dombrowski left Highlander Folk School. He stayed with the Durrs for a time, during which Virginia encouraged him to take the position as executive secretary of the SCHW. Dombrowski agreed.⁴³⁵ The appointment thrilled Virginia. She wrote Jim, “I think since you have taken over the Conference it has begun for the first time to assume some form and real content and has ceased being an almost inarticulate voice of protest.”⁴³⁶ During his tenure, Dombrowski spent most of his time trying to keep the SCHW financially soluble. Dombrowski was not the only change in the SCHW leadership. Upon the resignation of Frank Graham, John Thompson served as interim president, succeeded by Clark Foreman. During Thompson’s interim, the Conference elected Virginia Durr and William Mitch vice-chairpersons. When Foreman took office, Virginia stayed on as vice-chairperson, along with five other members.⁴³⁷

⁴³³ “The South’s Part in Winning the War for Democracy,” pamphlet, 1942, SCEF Papers, box 4, folder 84.

⁴³⁴ C.J. Durr to James Dombrowski, 20 March 1942, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 5.

⁴³⁵ Frank T. Adams, *James A. Dombrowski: An American Heretic, 1897-1983* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 132-133.

⁴³⁶ Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360.

⁴³⁷ Adams, *James A. Dombrowski*, 144-45; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 30.

At the Nashville meeting, race was the primary issue. On the first day of the conference, Virginia recalled an episode in which herself, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jim Dombrowski, Dr. Charles Johnson, and Mary McLeod Bethune boarded an elevator. The elevator operator informed Bethune she would have to ride in the freight elevator because she was black. According to Virginia, Bethune informed the young man that she was not freight, and the entire group climbed the stairs. Bethune, who suffered from asthma, began to have breathing problems and asked for a doctor. Frightened, the hotel manager summoned an ambulance and a doctor, but Bethune refused to go to the hospital. According to Virginia, “[Bethune] wouldn’t do anything but stay there and make that hotel manager feel guilty. . . .he apologized and carried on, and for that moment, segregation was forgotten in the Hermitage Hotel.”⁴³⁸ Durr’s admiration of Bethune grew after the incident, and Virginia was struck by a woman who refused to accept a status as a second-class citizen.

By 1942, the SCHW had made racial equality its paramount priority. Like the NCAPT, the SCHW linked the fight against fascism to the fight against racism. Its racial liberalism, as well as Communist accusations, led to a decline in membership during the 1940s—only five hundred delegates attended the 1942 meeting. Yet, as a sign of the group’s solidarity behind racial equality, Paul Robeson, singer and civil rights activist, agreed to perform at the Nashville meeting. The integrated concert proved a great success for the SCHW; yet, Robeson’s comment during the concert, that he would like to see Earl Bowder, secretary of the Communist Party, released from jail, sparked another wave of red-baiting by opponents of the SCHW.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 154.

⁴³⁹ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 80-83.

Red-baiting continued to plague the SCHW throughout the 1940s, albeit it was somewhat tame during the war years. Increasingly, any challenge to the racial status quo in the South came to be linked to Communism. The twin pillars of racism and anti-Communism became intertwined by the 1940s, and the charges of “pro-Communism” were leveled at most, if not all, civil rights organizations until the 1960s. The result was an increasing departure of many liberals from civil rights causes.⁴⁴⁰ Although Virginia viewed the accusations an “irritating diversion,” with the growth of the anti-Communist hysteria, particularly after the war, members of the SCHW began to take the charges seriously.⁴⁴¹ Executive Secretary, Virginia Beecher, who had returned from a tour of the South, sarcastically informed Dombrowski that she had it on “good authority” that both Jim and Clark Foreman were Communists.⁴⁴² Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Virginia, suggesting that “it would be wise to check carefully the political affiliations of all new members and get rid of any who will in the long run hurt the whole conference.”⁴⁴³ Although Foreman and Dombrowski refused to “purge” the SCHW, by 1944, the conference established new by-laws, disallowing membership for any persons who advocated the overthrow of the government by violence, or by any member who belonged to such an organization that advocated such action.⁴⁴⁴ Claude Pepper argued that the SCHW was, in fact, a “threat,” but only to “the dishonest politics of the South and the reactionaries who rule it.”⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, 47.; Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 137; see also Woods, *Black Struggle*..

⁴⁴¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 166.

⁴⁴² Virginia Beecher to James Dombrowski, 8 March 1946, SCEF Papers, box 2, folder 23.

⁴⁴³ Eleanor Roosevelt to Virginia Durr, 10 June 1942, ER Papers, series 100.

⁴⁴⁴ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 154; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 33.

⁴⁴⁵ ‘Pepper Hits Making South ‘A Colony’,’ *New York Times*, 29 November 1946, 35.

Financial problems also weakened the SCHW. In 1944, the conference cancelled its bi-annual meeting, due to war-time shortages. In 1942, the SCHW began publication of the *Southern Patriot*, which increased its need for funding. Virginia contributed periodically to the publication, writing an article on liberal Southern editors and their support. Lack of funds was the primary impetus for the SCHW's severing of some of its financial support for the NCAPT in 1946. One of the conference's largest supporters, the CIO, also withdrew financial support primarily due to the red-baiting of the SCHW.⁴⁴⁶

The NCAPT and SCHW got caught up in the internal divisions and anti-Communist charges leveled at the labor movement. When John L. Lewis broke with the American Federation of Labor and formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938, the CIO focused some of its organizing efforts on the South. In 1946, the CIO formed an "Operation Dixie" campaign to organize Southern laborers. Although "Operation Dixie" was relatively unsuccessful, due to local and industrial resistance, the interracial cooperation of the movement broke by the late 1940s. Like many popular front groups, the CIO began to purge Communists and Communist 'sympathizers' from its ranks. The NCAPT and the SCHW, who, according to critics, consisted of "fellow travelers", was among those groups with which the CIO sought to disaffiliate by 1946.⁴⁴⁷

The year 1946 proved to be a turning point for the SCHW. That year, the SCHW held its fourth bi-annual meeting in New Orleans. The theme, "Free Democracy's Resources: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare Works for a Prosperous,

⁴⁴⁶ Milton Rose to James Dombrowski, 25 March 1943, SCEF Papers, box 1, folder 10; James Dombrowski to American People's Fund, 7 May 1943, SCEF Papers, box 1, folder 6; James Dombrowski to Mr. Kirkpatrick, 13 July 1943, SCEF Papers, box 4, folder 84; James Dombrowski to Virginia Durr, 9 March 1944, SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360; James Dombrowski to Jennings Perry, 6 December 1946, SCEF Papers, box 24, folder 317; Sosna, *Silent South*, 145.

⁴⁴⁷ Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 524; Lichtenstein, "Corporation," 135-137; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 241.

Progressive South,” clearly demonstrated the organization’s concern in the post-war era. For the first time since its inception, Eleanor Roosevelt, busy with the United Nations, did not attend. The financial problems that plagued the SCHW forced it to form a non-profit arm, the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). The SCEF was to function as the educational unit of the Conference, allowing the SCHW to focus its attention on political activism. Clark Foreman recommended James Dombrowski to head the SCEF, a demotion in the Board’s view. Although he felt insulted, Virginia encouraged Dombrowski to accept the position and not to leave because he disliked confrontation.⁴⁴⁸

The creation of the SCEF was the beginning of the end of the Southern Conference. Money problems and internal differences continued to plague the organization, although the SCHW did attempt to continue its work during the late 1940s. The SCHW sponsored a nationwide tour for Mary McLeod Bethune in order to raise much-needed funding for the group. Working as Vice-Chairman of the Committee for Virginia, Virginia Durr helped sponsor a pay-your-poll tax campaign in the state to encourage voter participation in the primaries.⁴⁴⁹ It also continued to fight for civil rights and civil liberties.

In 1946, the SCHW came to the defense of African Americans in Columbia, Tennessee. In February of 1946, whites accosted an African-American woman and her son in a radio repair shop after she complained of poor workmanship. Authorities imprisoned the two, but community blacks rescued them from an ensuing lynch mob. In

⁴⁴⁸ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 103, 118-120; Adams, *James A. Dombrowski*, 172-74.

⁴⁴⁹ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 100-101; Virginia Beecher to Jim Dombrowski, 8 March 1946, SCEF Papers, box 2, folder 3; Virginia Beecher to ‘Citizen of Virginia,’ 26 June 1946, SCEF Papers, box 2, folder 25.

self-defense, the black community armed itself, wounding four white officers. In retaliation, the police looted black businesses and arrested almost one hundred African Americans, beating some that were held in prison, and killing two. The SCHW worked with the NAACP and other civil rights organizations to bring awareness to the injustice in Columbia, Tennessee as well as to raise funds for the defendants.⁴⁵⁰ The SCHW disseminated around 200,000 copies of their pamphlet “The Truth About the Columbia Tennessee Cases,” invoking the principles of world democracy and freedom, stating that aid given “will be keeping faith with the soldiers of all races, colors and creeds who died side by side for the same cause.”⁴⁵¹ At times, Dombrowski feared for his life, receiving death threats for the SCHW’s support. The Columbia case also prompted SCHW to support a federal anti-lynching law.⁴⁵²

More damaging to SCHW’s effectiveness were the charges of Communist infiltration. While Theodore Bilbo’s charges of Communist adherence in the organization must be taken at its source, red-baiting was not limited to Southern demagogues. Communist accusations intensified in 1947, when the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) published its “Report on the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.” The report charged SCHW as the country’s “most deviously camouflaged Communist-front organization.”⁴⁵³ According to the Committee, the Communist Party controlled the Southern Conference, both financially, as well as through membership infiltration. HUAC considered those who were not affiliated with

⁴⁵⁰ “The Truth About the Columbia Tennessee Cases,” pamphlet, 1946, MJ Papers, box 32, folder 15.32.16; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 108-113.

⁴⁵¹ “The Truth About Columbia,” 9.

⁴⁵² Adam, *James A. Dombrowski*, 162; James Dombrowski to ‘Friend,’ 24 May 1947, SCEF Papers, box 2, folder 39.

⁴⁵³ House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Report on the Southern Conference for Human Welfare*, 80th Congress, 1st sess., 16 June 1947, 17.

the Communist Party, including Frank Graham, ‘fellow travelers,’ who duped the public about the true intentions of the organization. According to the report, “the real purpose of the organization was not ‘human welfare’ in the South, but rather to serve as a convenient vehicle in support of the current Communist Party line.”⁴⁵⁴

The findings of the report publicly tainted the SCHW. Although Southern senators had been making similar charges about the SCHW since its inception, the Cold War political climate of the post-war era solidified the ‘pinkness’ of the SCHW. Lieutenant Colonel Randolph of the Military Intelligence, testifying before HUAC, summed up the feelings of most conservatives when he stated, “A liberal is only a hop, skip, and a jump from a Communist. A Communist starts as a liberal.”⁴⁵⁵ However, Communist charges did not cause the demise of the SCHW, although they did play a major role. Financial problems and internal struggles, particularly between James Dombrowski and Clark Foreman, contributed substantially. In November of 1948, the SCHW agreed to disband.⁴⁵⁶ Liberals did not forget their goals, however, as the SCEF continued to fight for racial equality in the South.

While the SCHW battled Communist allegations, Cliff and Virginia Durr faced their own ‘red-baiting’. Still troubled over the FBI investigation in the early 1940s, Clifford Durr publicly criticized the Bureau and J. Edgar Hoover. His criticisms led the FBI to resume their surveillance of Cliff. Hoover, for his part, considered any criticism of

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁵⁵ Randolph, quoted in Cauter, *Great Fear*, 269.

⁴⁵⁶ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 127-129; Virginia claimed she had to work as the ‘go-between’ for Foreman and Dombrowski, as their personalities differed so greatly, they did not get along well (Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 186-87). For more on the Dombrowski/Foreman split, see Adams, *James A. Dombrowski*, 163-177.

the Bureau and its activities “un-American.”⁴⁵⁷ Insiders provided copies of the FBI surveillance to Cliff, which he used as the basis for his criticism. He also concluded that “the report of the FBI was directed at the activities of my wife, rather than my own.”⁴⁵⁸ According to Durr, the FBI reports constituted his “closest approximation to a Damascus Road experience. . . .the experience was transforming in the sense that it opened my eyes a little wider to things I had not seen so clearly before.”⁴⁵⁹ The FBI report permanently jaded Cliff and perhaps led him to make his most noble stand during his term with the FCC—refusal to submit to Truman’s Loyalty Oath program.

In 1947, in an ardent attempt to appear ‘tough’ on Communism, President Truman issued Executive Order 9835, requiring a background check of all federal employees. In reality, Truman only expanded and codified a loyalty program which Roosevelt had established during the war. With the Loyalty Program, Truman legitimized for the American public the fear of Communist subversion. While a few liberals viewed the oath as necessary, most liberals adamantly opposed it.⁴⁶⁰ Henry Steele Commager was among those who publicly criticized the order:

it is not only membership in or affiliation with subversive organizations that is proscribed, but “sympathetic association” with them. What is sympathetic association, and how is it distinguished from unsympathetic

⁴⁵⁷ “FCC Answers Durr,” *New York Times*, 2 December 1947, 17; “FBI Explains Role in F.C.C.,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 November 1947, CJD FBI files; D.M. Ladd to Director, 20 November 1947, CJD FBI files; Cauter, *Great Fear*, 113.

⁴⁵⁸ For various copies of the FBI report, see CJD Papers, box 34, folder 9; Clifford Durr to Joe Starnes, 2 April, 1947, CJD Papers, box 34, folder 9.

⁴⁵⁹ Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 4.

⁴⁶⁰ Fried, *Nightmare in Red*, 67; Alonso L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 379, 171.

association? . . . here is the doctrine of guilt by association with a vengeance.⁴⁶¹

Along with Commager, Clifford Durr joined in the public debate. He had already been involved in a loyalty oath investigation in 1941, regarding a member of the FCC, Goodwin Watson. Durr defended Watson and felt the entire process unconstitutional. When Truman issued his order, Durr wrote a dissenting opinion against the order and attempted to demonstrate the unconstitutionality of the program. He claimed that the loyalty oath would have long-range effects.⁴⁶² He shared Henry Wallace's view that with the loyalty program, "Intolerance is around. Suspicion is engendered. Men of the highest integrity in public life are besmirched."⁴⁶³ In a speech before the National Citizens Conference on Civil Liberties, Durr warned, "private branding irons are already being made after the Government's pattern and more will be made. Can anyone be sure he will never feel their burn?"⁴⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Truman offered Durr reappointment in the FCC in 1948. Durr declined.

Personally, Durr liked Truman, but disapproved of the "cruelty" and the "serious injury to basic American rights" that Truman unleashed with the loyal order.⁴⁶⁵ He refused his reappointment to the FCC, but made no public statement as to the reason. Durr simply claimed that the salary was insufficient; yet, the basis for his resignation was the loyalty oath program. A number of supporters stood by Durr, and his position earned

⁴⁶¹ Henry Steele Commager, "Washington Witch-Hunt," *The Nation*, 5 April 1947, 384-385.

⁴⁶² Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 98-103; Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 7; Clifford Durr, "Dissenting Views of Commissioner Clifford J. Durr RE Proposed Rules Governing FCC-Loyalty Procedure," VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 125.

⁴⁶³ Henry Wallace, speech at Madison Square Garden, March 1947, quoted in Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 438.

⁴⁶⁴ "Loyalty Reviews Scored as Unfair," *New York Times*, 15 April 1948, 26.

⁴⁶⁵ Clifford Durr to Hugo Black, 10 March 1966, CJD Papers, box 4, folder 2.

him public notoriety in Washington for a time.⁴⁶⁶ In a speech shortly before he quit the FCC, Clifford Durr claimed that the loyalty program, “treats rumor and gossip as evidence and shelters it from the test of examination. In the name of security, it raises tale-bearers and informers to a new level of human dignity.”⁴⁶⁷ Although Hugo Black agreed with Durr, and he admired Cliff’s courage, he also felt that Cliff “had chosen to be a martyr and lost his effectiveness. That was a tragedy since he is a most talented man.”⁴⁶⁸

The struggles during the war years took their toll on Virginia. She was frequently ill during the war. While Cliff was understandably concerned, he felt that exercise would help, although Virginia was “decidedly lacking in athletic inclinations or skill.”⁴⁶⁹ Cliff’s trip to Moscow with the FCC in 1946 left Virginia to care for her children and household on her own. In 1947, at the age of forty-three, she gave birth to another daughter, Lulah. The strain of her work and family caught up with Virginia. A doctor diagnosed her with “nervous exhaustion,” and she was occasionally hospitalized.⁴⁷⁰ She wrote to Jim Dombrowski,

I have never felt at such a low ebb. I am under the care of a Doctor and he said I was suffering from complete exhaustion and in a state like that you are not very effective. I really need all the help I can get. . . .trying to run

⁴⁶⁶“Durr to Quit FCC June 30,” *New York Times*, 23 April 1948, 48; “Shadow of a Rock,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 6 July 1948, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 7.

⁴⁶⁷ “Durr Declines Reappointment,” newspaper clipping, *Montgomery Examiner*, 1947, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 4.

⁴⁶⁸ Hugo Black, quoted in Newman, *Hugo Black*, 382.

⁴⁶⁹ Clifford Durr to Lucy Judkins Durr, 12 August 1943, DF Papers, box 5, folder 4. Virginia mentions having the “flu” frequently in her letters during the war. See, for example, Virginia Durr to James Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360; Virginia Durr to James Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360.

⁴⁷⁰ Virginia Durr to James Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 260; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 88-91; Clifford Durr to Virginia Durr, 14 October 1946, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 4.

a house and a family and the Poll Tax and having so many conflicting claims has gotten me down.⁴⁷¹

Despite her exhaustion, she worked to try and revive the NCAPT, although with little success. She wrote, “sometimes I get despairing—and then I think of the progress that has been made in the South at least in getting matters out in the open—and perhaps something may get done about them.”⁴⁷²

The war itself also profoundly impacted Virginia. News of the Holocaust altered Virginia’s view of humanity: “until the Holocaust, I was really an innocent. I really believed that men were fundamentally good. . . . the Holocaust changed my entire view of the world.”⁴⁷³ The death of more than six million people in Europe confirmed Virginia’s growing fear of fascism. When the war ended, she recalled that they felt that the United States was the greatest country in the world, a true ‘arsenal of democracy’ and generosity. Virginia recalled, “it wasn’t a year later before everything just turned upside down. McCarthyism started.”⁴⁷⁴ Virginia’s hope of Democratic reform vanished after the death of Roosevelt. The Popular Front politics that characterized her work in the 1930s dissipated as tension with the Soviet Union escalated after 1945. With Truman in office and anti-Communism hysteria escalating, Virginia abandoned the Democratic Party in the 1948 presidential election. She threw her lot in with the man she had championed in 1940, Henry A. Wallace.

⁴⁷¹ Virginia Durr to James Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360.

⁴⁷² Virginia Durr to James Dombrowski, n.d, SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946.

⁴⁷³ Terkel, “*Good War*,” 333.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

CHAPTER VI

RUNNING WITH HENRY WALLACE, 1948

For many Americans, the death of Franklin Roosevelt meant the death of liberal hopes. After his death, many liberals began to view FDR as a “secular Christ symbol, who had given his life to save America from the hopelessness of depression and the grinding authoritarianism of fascism.”⁴⁷⁵ American citizens lamented the death of Roosevelt. In an address at FDR’s memorial, Justice Jackson declared, “no other event could bow so many human heads in a common sorrow and of personal loss. . . .while he walked with kings, they knew that he never lost the common touch.”⁴⁷⁶ The Durrs took their children to attend FDR’s funeral cortege, along with thousands of people, most in tears.⁴⁷⁷ The funeral tolls that followed the President’s death were not only for Roosevelt, but also for the New Deal. When Truman assumed office upon FDR’s death in April of 1945, he was relatively unknown among the New Deal coalition.

Truman was elected to the Senate in 1934, had supported the New Deal, and even stood by FDR on some of Roosevelt’s most controversial actions, such as the court-packing scheme. Chosen over Henry Wallace, Truman became Vice-President in 1944, but was kept fairly ignorant of Roosevelt’s dealings with the Soviet Union and the post-war world. The liberal movement was unsure of Truman; he seemed out of his depth as

⁴⁷⁵ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 140.

⁴⁷⁶ “Franklin Roosevelt,” *Washington Post*, 15 April 1945, B4.

⁴⁷⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 183.

President and lacked the leadership and vision of FDR. Many feared that post-war America would return to “normalcy,” catering to big business and corporations, thereby abandoning the reform efforts of the New Deal. In 1948, Henry Wallace, who had come to oppose Truman, declared, “In Hyde Park they buried our President and in Washington they buried our dreams. One day after Roosevelt died Harry Truman entered the White House. And forty-six days later Herbert Hoover was there.”⁴⁷⁸ Wallace feared that the government and the economy would return to the Hoover era and all New Deal reform efforts would be abandoned by Truman. According to Alonzo Hamby, the New Deal liberals, and Truman, distrusted each other initially, but “given favorable circumstances, these reservations might easily have evaporated; in the chaotic world of 1945, they would degenerate into mutual suspicion and hostility.”⁴⁷⁹

Upon taking office, Truman’s views on social reform were also ambiguous. He had no intention of causing a fight over electoral reform, particularly the poll tax, but supported the creation of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Started under Roosevelt in response to A. Philip Randolph’s threat of a March on Washington the FEPC was to investigate racial discrimination in government industries. Truman sought to make the agency permanent but faced considerable Southern opposition. For its part, the NCAPT tried to keep its struggle separate from other civil rights issues like the FEPC. Concerned about the Republican Party championing anti-poll tax and anti-lynching legislation, thereby taking black votes from the Democratic Party, by 1948, Truman supported anti-poll tax and anti-lynching legislation as well as

⁴⁷⁸ Henry Wallace, “My Commitments,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 14 (1 August 1948): 620.

⁴⁷⁹ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 51.

the desegregation of the military.⁴⁸⁰ Senator James Eastland of Mississippi argued that Truman's actions demonstrated that "the organized mongrel minorities control the Government. I'm going to fight it to the last ditch. They're not going to Harlemize the country."⁴⁸¹ Truman's support of civil rights legislation led to the defecting of Southern Democrats in the 1948 election.⁴⁸² Yet, his actions simultaneously drew liberals back to the Democratic Party.

While Truman's social policies appeased many liberals, others found his creation of the Loyalty Oath Program and the rising power of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) troublesome at best. As early as 1937, conservative opposition began its attack on the New Deal. The court-packing scheme, the recession of 1937-1938, and the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 allowed for ample criticism of Roosevelt and increasing accusations that Communists had infiltrated FDR's administration. In 1938, Congressman Martin Dies, a Democrat from Texas, helped establish the House Committee on Un-American Activities for the purpose of investigating communist infiltration in American society and government. Within months, the Dies Committee labeled more than six hundred organizations, over four hundred newspapers, and two-hundred eighty labor unions 'Communistic' or subversive. Many conservatives witnessed their careers flourish when they wrapped themselves with the mantle of anti-Communism.⁴⁸³ The New Deal and New Deal supporters bore the brunt of the attacks. According to Arthur Schlesinger, "the New Dealers who had seen every piece of reform

⁴⁸⁰ Lawson, *Ballots*, 77, 83; Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 37 (November 1971): 597-616.

⁴⁸¹ "Committee Forces Senate to Act on Ives FEPC Bill," *New York Times*, 2 February 1948, 1.

⁴⁸² For more on the "Dixicrat" revolt, see Sitkoff, "Harry Truman."

⁴⁸³ "Contemporary Moves Toward Control," *Congressional Digest*, October 1949, 233-234; Fried, *Nightmare in Red*, 9; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 280.

legislation in their time denounced as ‘socialistic’ or ‘communistic’ remained unmoved when they heard the same old cries from the same old criers.”⁴⁸⁴

Among those “unmoved” was Virginia Durr. Like several liberals, such as Henry Wallace, she failed to take Communist accusations seriously, either out of naiveté or stubbornness. In 1948, the Mundt-Nixon bill required all Communist or Communist-front organizations to register with the federal government. Most liberals, like Virginia and Clifford Durr, demanded proof, a fair hearing, and the security of individual rights when faced with charges of disloyalty. They viewed “red-baiting” as more dangerous to American society than communism.⁴⁸⁵ Some liberals held fast to the Popular Front approach to politics that worked during the Depression and war years. Yet, at the time most liberals were rejecting Popular Front politics, Virginia Durr was maintaining it. She was either unaware or unconcerned about the dangerous political climate of the post-war era.

Popular front politics comprised the heart of Henry A. Wallace’s presidential campaign in 1948. Roosevelt appointed Henry Wallace, formerly an agrarian reformer in Iowa, Secretary of Agriculture in 1933. He was a great supporter of FDR and the New Deal, a stand that garnered him the vice-presidential nomination in 1940. By 1944, Southern opposition to Wallace intensified, particularly with Wallace’s stand on civil rights and labor, and, needing Southern support for the war effort, FDR replaced Wallace in 1944 with Harry Truman. For many liberals, Henry Wallace became a martyr in 1944, a “legend of virtue fallen before the mechanizations of the vested interests.”⁴⁸⁶ Still a

⁴⁸⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Co., 1960), 198.

⁴⁸⁵ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 383.

⁴⁸⁶ Markowitz, *Rise and Fall*, 115.

Roosevelt supporter, Wallace obtained labor support for the 1944 election, and in return, Roosevelt appointed Wallace as Secretary of Commerce the following year.

Part of Wallace's appeal to liberals, and ultimately his demise, was his firm belief in world peace and justice. He championed the "common man," labeling the post-war era the "century of the common man." In a 1942 speech, he declared, "the people's revolution aims at peace and not at violence, but if the rights of the common man are attacked, it unleashes the ferocity of a she-bear who has lost a cub."⁴⁸⁷ During the war, Wallace supported the 'Double V' campaign and championed the rights of labor and minorities. He ardently supported the repeal of the poll tax, declaring at the 1944 Democratic convention, "the poll tax must go!"⁴⁸⁸ After the death of Roosevelt, Wallace began his criticism of Truman's foreign policy. He advocated the sharing of atomic secrets with Russia and argued that the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine divided Europe into two armed camps. Until the 1950s, he felt that the United States was the dominant aggressor in Cold War hostilities.⁴⁸⁹

Personally, Wallace was a deeply religious man. He believed in the Social Gospel, but his religious faith often isolated him from mainstream society. Wallace had an interest in mysticism, and believed that science, nature, and religion co-existed in harmony with man. His relationship with Nicholas Roerich, a Russian mystic known as the "guru," whom Wallace sent to China on a scientific expedition in 1934, almost led to public humiliation for both Wallace, as well as the Roosevelt administration.⁴⁹⁰ Despite

⁴⁸⁷ Henry A. Wallace, "The Price of Free World Victory," in *The Century of the Common Man* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1943), 17-18.

⁴⁸⁸ Michael Straight, "Days of Hope with Henry Wallace," *New Republic*, 4 December 1965, 9.

⁴⁸⁹ Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 521.

⁴⁹⁰ Markowitz, *Rise and Fall*, 15-16; Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 22; Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 78-79. For a look at Wallace's relationship with Nicholas Roerich, see Charles J. Errico and J. Samuel Walker, "The New Deal and the Guru," *American Heritage*, March 1989, 92-99.

Wallace's political experience, he never obtained an talent for personal relationships. Wallace, "championed the common man in the abstract; yet he seemed incapable of relating to individuals."⁴⁹¹ He could not remember names, seemed to live in his own world, and could be self-righteous and ungrateful to supporters. Wallace also failed to hide his boredom with anything he considered unimportant and would often be seen dozing during supporters' speeches.⁴⁹² Yet, for liberals who envisioned a post-war world built on the social reform ideas of the New Deal, Wallace appeared to be Roosevelt's rightful successor.

In September of 1946, Wallace gave a speech at Madison Square Garden, criticizing Truman's "get tough" policy with the Soviet Union and declaring, "we who look on this 'war-with-Russia talk' as criminal foolishness must carry our message direct to the people—even though we may be called communists because we dare to speak out."⁴⁹³ Communism and capitalism, according to Wallace, could co-exist peacefully. Wallace's criticisms of Truman's foreign policy led the President to ask for Wallace's resignation. With the death of FDR, and Truman's alienation of some segments of the liberal coalition, "Henry Wallace, courting political martyrdom, provided the leadership they needed."⁴⁹⁴ Virginia Durr was one of the New Deal liberals who decided to follow Wallace.

Although Wallace previously denounced third parties, by 1947, he began to consider the creation of a new party to challenge Truman. Wallace felt that Truman was

⁴⁹¹ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 23.

⁴⁹² Straight, "Days of Hope," 9-10; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 198; Karl M. Schmidt, *Henry A. Wallace: Quixotic Crusade, 1948* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1960), 53.

⁴⁹³ Henry A. Wallace, *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace, 1942-1946*, ed. John Morton Blum (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973), 668. According to Wallace, Truman read his speech and approved it before it was delivered. Truman maintained he only took a cursory glance.

⁴⁹⁴ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 29.

not demonstrating his liberal ideas to the public. In his diary Wallace wrote, “I said [Truman] could not hope to win the election unless he went way over to the left not merely with words but with the tune.”⁴⁹⁵ During that year, Wallace toured Europe and England, criticizing Truman’s foreign policy, particularly the Truman Doctrine.⁴⁹⁶ He also toured the South, sponsored by the SCHW, which remained “part of a shrinking coalition dedicated to sustaining an independent movement within the Democratic Party, free to challenge and debate Truman’s cold war policies.”⁴⁹⁷ During his Southern tour, Wallace refused to speak to segregated audiences and denounced Jim Crow. According to Clark Foreman, more than 30,000 people heard Wallace speak on his tour of the South. Foreman proclaimed, “we [SCHW] feel that there is a strong and lively progressivism in the South looking for leadership that could neither be cowed by prejudice nor intimidated by threats of violence.”⁴⁹⁸ For Wallace, the speaking tour “was a way to bring salvation to a wayward nation.”⁴⁹⁹

Virginia became involved in the Wallace campaign through her work in the Washington Committee of the SCHW. Fearing another war, Durr felt drawn to his promotion of cooperation between the Soviet Union and the United States. Durr also supported Wallace’s challenge to segregation in the South. By 1948, Virginia was a committed anti-segregationist. She wrote to W.R. Smith, editor of the *Macon News*,

I know that the Negro people do want segregation abolished and that any Negro you find who says he does not want segregation abolished

⁴⁹⁵ Wallace, *Price of Vision*, 622.

⁴⁹⁶ “Wallace Opposes Third Party in U.S.,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1946, 7; Freda Kirchwey, “The Challenge of Henry Wallace,” *Nation*, 28 September 1946, 337-339.

⁴⁹⁷ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 241.

⁴⁹⁸ Clark Foreman to the Editor of PM, 26 November 1947, SCHW Papers, box 27, folder 5.

⁴⁹⁹ Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 444.

has either lost his manhood, or is playing a part to curry favor with the White community. If I did not feel that the Negro people wanted segregation abolished I would not feel that they were worth fighting for.⁵⁰⁰

While Virginia supported desegregation, she still maintained a paternalistic attitude towards African Americans. Her paternalism, her feeling that she was of a white elite chosen to fight for the weak, remained with her throughout her life and often characterized her fight for civil rights.

Virginia met Wallace years before through Lister Hill, during Wallace's term as Secretary of Agriculture, and she had supported him as Vice-Presidential nominee in 1940.⁵⁰¹ Virginia found him to be "so sweet and serious. . . I just adored him," but "he was a horrible politician."⁵⁰² Henry reminded Virginia of "purple mountains' majesty and golden plains of wheat and the West and pioneers and covered wagons. . . I was just crazy about Henry Wallace."⁵⁰³ Virginia courted Wallace's public support of anti-poll tax legislation as well, although he was not always as forthcoming as Virginia hoped. She was told that Wallace had already made his opinion clear about the poll tax at the 1944 Democratic Convention, and that, asking him to make another public statement, would be like "asking Lincoln to repeat the Gettysburg Address."⁵⁰⁴ Although Durr devoted herself to Wallace, the relationship was not necessarily reciprocated. As Vice-President, he refused an appointment with Durr. "Dubious about this woman," he did not

⁵⁰⁰ Virginia Durr to W.R. Smith, 23 January 1948, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 13.

⁵⁰¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 195-96.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵⁰³ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 203, 202.

⁵⁰⁴ Henry Wallace to Virginia Durr, 18 March 1946, MsC 177, box 31, Henry A. Wallace Papers, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa; Virginia Durr to Beanie Baldwin, 29 October 1945, C.B. Baldwin Papers, series I, box 5.

want to see her.⁵⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Virginia felt that she and Wallace “shared many New Deal dreams.”⁵⁰⁶

Through her friendship with B.C. “Beanie” Baldwin, Virginia’s interest in the Progressive Citizens of America (PCA), the forerunner of the Progressive Party, grew.⁵⁰⁷ In 1945, she became a member of the executive council of the Citizens’s Political Action Committee (PAC), the non-labor arm of the CIO-PAC, in which Baldwin served as assistant chairman.⁵⁰⁸ Baldwin was also opposed to the poll tax. Virginia encouraged Baldwin to use his influence to pressure Truman to make a public statement on the poll tax in 1946. She felt that if the NCAPT could get the open backing of Truman, the anti-poll tax bill would pass, as she thought “the boys [southern congressmen] are getting a little scared.”⁵⁰⁹

Through her work with the SCHW, Durr became involved in Wallace’s Southern tour in 1947. In Norfolk, Virginia, Wallace supporters, including Durr, faced opposition when they challenged the local segregation law. The local police tried to bar Durr from the platform while they attempted to segregate the meeting. With encouragement from Clark Foreman, Virginia invited a local preacher to pray while the participants waited for Wallace to arrive. Virginia remembered the praying continued for some time, followed by all five verses of the “Star-Spangled Banner.” When the police finally were about to make their arrests, Wallace arrived.⁵¹⁰ Virginia recalled, “he walked down the aisle to

⁵⁰⁵ MH to Mrs. Eaton, n.d., Wallace Papers, MsC 177, Box LC11.

⁵⁰⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 196.

⁵⁰⁷ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 196.

⁵⁰⁸ Virginia Durr to Beanie Baldwin, 20 June 1945, C.B. Baldwin Papers, series I, box 5; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 172-173.

⁵⁰⁹ Virginia Durr to Beanie Baldwin, 7 January 1946, C.B. Baldwin Papers, series I, box 5.

⁵¹⁰ Foreman to Editor; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 198.

the platform and made his speech, completely oblivious to everything.”⁵¹¹ Yet, for a moment, Wallace and the SCHW had dismantled segregation in the state of Virginia. In addition, Wallace’s tour raised much needed money for the SCHW. Yet, while the SCHW was getting a boost from the Wallace tour, the organization was also becoming increasingly discredited in the eyes of mainstream liberals. It was no coincidence that the HUAC report on the SCHW coalesced with Wallace’s Southern tour, tainting both Wallace and the SCHW as ‘communist front’ supporters.⁵¹²

In December of 1947, Wallace announced his candidacy for president, running on the Progressive Party ticket. In 1946, the Progressive Citizens of America (PCA) was formed by the consolidation of several political organizations, such as the National Citizens Political Action Committee and the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions. Its founding committee included Beanie Baldwin, Walter White, Clark Foreman, and Mary McLeod Bethune. The PCA’s leading spokesman and titular head was Henry Wallace. With the encouragement of Beanie Baldwin, who had worked with Wallace in the Department of Agriculture, Vito Marcantonio, and SCHW’s Clark Foreman, the PCA sponsored the creation of the Progressive Party (PPA).⁵¹³ According to Wallace, his candidacy provided the American people with a third party and a person “they can vote for without holding their noses.”⁵¹⁴

Unlike the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), founded the same year and which had the support of Eleanor Roosevelt, the PCA did not bar Communists from its ranks. The ADA quickly isolated itself from the Communist Party and the popular front

⁵¹¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 198.

⁵¹² Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 247; Adams, *James A. Dombrowski*, 180.

⁵¹³ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 236. The Durrs also had a link to the ICASP, as Clifford Durr had made speeches to the organization during 1945.

⁵¹⁴ “Wallace Bid for President Due Tonight,” *Washington Post*, 29 December 1947, 1.

and believed that the Soviet Union was engaged in aggressive expansionism.

Conversely, the PCA maintained that the USSR was acting only in self-defense.⁵¹⁵

Wallace declared, “This movement is as broad as humanity itself. I urge that we accept all people who wish for a peaceful understanding between the United States and Soviet Russia.”⁵¹⁶ The PCA’s embrace of popular front politics, therefore, left it ripe for charges of communist infiltration. The Progressive Party “incorporated the PCA, much of the SCHW, and a host of union members, civil rights activists and independent liberals.”⁵¹⁷ Also included in the Progressive Party support were Communists.

The Progressive Party held its convention in July of 1948 in Philadelphia. While the liberal movement of the 1930s split between the ADA and the PCA, many prominent figures within the liberal coalition attended the convention. Among them were Lillian Hellman, Paul Robeson, Vito Marcantonio, Clark Foreman, and Virginia Durr. Durr also sat on the platform committee, headed by Rexford Tugwell, a member of FDR’s “brain trust.” Most of the delegates were young, many were union members, and not a few were African American. Music was vital to the convention—reworked folk songs, popular songs, and even patriotic songs, sung by Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger, fit the convention’s themes.⁵¹⁸ Wallace termed his followers, “Gideon’s Army,” a reference to the biblical book of Judges, in which a small army, led by God, defeated a larger one to deliver Gideon’s people from bondage. Virginia Durr’s enthusiasm for the PPA convention echoed that of the first meeting of the SCHW—she claimed it was “thrilling. .

⁵¹⁵ Mary Sperling McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 24, 7.

⁵¹⁶ Wallace, quoted in Schmidt, *Quixotic Crusade*, 93.

⁵¹⁷ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 248.

⁵¹⁸ “Politicians Scarce among Delegates,” *New York Times*, 23 July 1948, 10; “Wallaceites Start Work on Platform,” *Washington Post*, 21 July 1948, 6; Curtis D. MacDougall, *Gideon’s Army*, vol 2, (New York: Marzani, and Munsell, 1965), 557.

. .I loved it all. . . and Henry was just wonderful.”⁵¹⁹ Virginia’s idealism transferred itself from the SCHW to Wallace, and the hope that Wallace would save the country from itself never wavered throughout the campaign.

The Party’s platform focused on three main issues: foreign policy, discrimination, and freedom of speech. The PPA emphasized its drive for world peace, through the work of the United Nations, and denounced “anti-Soviet hysteria as a mask for monopoly, militarism, and reaction.”⁵²⁰ The Progressive Party demanded full equality for all Americans and called for federal anti-lynching, anti-poll tax, and anti-discriminatory legislation. Finally, delegates demanded the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee and an end to the Loyalty program.⁵²¹ In his acceptance speech as presidential candidate, Wallace assured his followers that he was committed to peaceful negotiations with Soviet Russia and to placing human life above property rights. Furthermore, Wallace proclaimed,

I am committed and do renounce the support of those who practice hate and preach prejudice; of those who would limit the civil rights of others; of those who would restrict the use of the ballot; of those who advocate force and violence; and I am committed to accept and do accept the support of those who favor the program of peace I have outlined here; the support of all those who truly believe in democracy.⁵²²

⁵¹⁹ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 204.

⁵²⁰ “Progressive Platform,” in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., vol. 4 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1971), 3167; “Wallaceites Reject Move Against Reds,” *Washington Post*, 26 July 1948, 1.

⁵²¹ “Progressive Platform,” 3168-3169.

⁵²² Wallace, “My Commitments,” 623.

By making civil rights part of the platform, the PPA pushed the issue into the national spotlight. Despite the hopefulness of the PPA convention, described by one reporter as having a “soda fountain” atmosphere, “few national gatherings have hurt their candidate so much.”⁵²³

Almost from the moment Wallace announced his candidacy in December of 1947, opponents began attacking the Progressive Party, claiming it was a Communist-front organization. Popular magazines of the period, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, quickly denounced the PPA as Communist-controlled. When Wallace announced his candidacy, *Newsweek* announced that “it was unarguable that Wallace. . . .had little organized support, except from avowed Communists and the most steadfast travelers.”⁵²⁴ *Time* magazine reported that Henry Wallace, “the centerpiece of U.S. Communism’s most authentic-looking façade,” appeared at the Progressive Party convention, “under careful Communist supervision.” The platform, particularly its foreign policy, was “in chapter and verse” a “lengthy resolution prepared for the Communists’ convention this month.”⁵²⁵ While the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA) did not direct the Progressive Party, they did support it.⁵²⁶ Although warned repeatedly, Wallace refused to purge Communists from his campaign. Michael Straight, who had worked with Wallace at the *New Republic*, tried to impress upon Wallace that Communists organized many of his rallies during his campaign tour. Undaunted, Wallace replied, “they [Communists] get out the crowds.”⁵²⁷

⁵²³ “Politicians Scarce,” *New York Times*, 10; Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 245.

⁵²⁴ “Wallace’s Four Year Plan,” *Newsweek*, 12 January 1948, 18.

⁵²⁵ “Third Parties: The Pink Façade,” *Time*, 2 August 1948, 12.

⁵²⁶ McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left*, 39.

⁵²⁷ Straight, “Days of Hope,” 10; Wallace worked for a time as editor on the *New Republic* but Straight felt that he was really not that interested in the work.

The majority of Americans, however, did not think Wallace a Communist, but a ‘fellow traveler,’ duped into campaigning by the conniving of the CPUSA.⁵²⁸ According to one periodical, “the Progressive Party is thus the most public and the largest Communist front organization in our history thus far. This makes it potentially the most dangerous to the public welfare.”⁵²⁹ Critics looked to the rank-and-file of the PPA, citing members like Vito Marcantonio, Lee Pressman, and Beanie Baldwin (who “has not been known to utter a single sentence that the extreme left could find serious objection to”) as proof positive that PPA was Communist-led.⁵³⁰ Yet, it was this “Communist bogey,” not the Communist Party itself that hurt the Wallace candidacy.⁵³¹ According to Virginia, “we never thought Joe Stalin was our savior. We thought he was a dictator, but you see, we didn’t believe you should sacrifice the rights of Americans or the American Constitution on account of Joe Stalin.”⁵³² Durr’s lack of anti-communist commitment would allow opponents to openly attack her in the early 1950s. Yet, during the Wallace campaign, Virginia continued to believe in the success of a popular-front strategy.

Opposition to Henry Wallace not only came from conservatives and red-baiters, but also from other liberals. The ADA denounced the PPA for its inclusion of Communists, and the entire Roosevelt family, including Eleanor, claimed that Communists were directing Wallace.⁵³³ *The Nation*, one of the major voices for American liberals, was intrigued by the Wallace candidacy, but hesitant in its support. Criticizing the split within the liberal ranks, Freda Kirchwey argued that “Gideon’s army

⁵²⁸ McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left*; Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 245; Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 464.

⁵²⁹ Charles Angoff, “Wallace’s Communist-Front Party,” *American Mercury*, October 1948, 418.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁵³¹ Schmidt, *Quixotic Crusade*, 279.

⁵³² Durr, interview by Marie Jemison, 4.

⁵³³ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 216.

was small and courageous and equipped only with lights and noise-making machines. . . .the leader of the third-party-to-be is more prophet than politician.”⁵³⁴ By 1948, even the *New Republic*, where Wallace had served for a time as editor, denounced his candidacy.⁵³⁵ Even more of a blow to Wallace was the withdrawal of labor support. As early as March, the CIO-PAC broke with Henry Wallace, calling his candidacy an “impractical scheme,” which would “contribute confusion” to the campaign.⁵³⁶ Engaged in its own purging of “reds” from its ranks, the CIO did not want any affiliation that could taint it with Communism.⁵³⁷

The Wallace campaign proved to be the final blow to the fledgling SCHW, already suffering from internal divisions and lack of funding. As early as 1945, the SCHW Committee for Virginia passed a resolution barring Communists and fellow travelers; however, the committee, with Durr’s insistence, voted down the motion. When the Conference openly declared its support for Wallace in 1948, a number of board members resigned.⁵³⁸ According to one political analyst, “the Southern Conference moved to the left of the CIO-PAC in the 1948 campaign.”⁵³⁹ Long-time supporters of the SCHW, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, John Kenneth Galbraith, Aubrey Williams, and Philip Murray of the CIO, had already transferred their support to the ADA. SCHW’s president, Clark Foreman, resigned to work full time on Wallace’s campaign, and state committees broke up during 1948.⁵⁴⁰ The SCHW’s championing of Wallace was its last

⁵³⁴ Freda Kirchwey, “Wallace: Prophet or Politician?,” *The Nation*, 10 January 1948, 29.

⁵³⁵ Straight, “Days of Hope,” 11.

⁵³⁶ “Third Party Denounced by CIO-PAC,” *Washington Post*, 15 March 1948, 2.

⁵³⁷ Lichtenstein, “Corporation,” 139; McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left*, 10-17.

⁵³⁸ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 243; Virginia Durr to Luther Jackson, 12 March 1948, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 13.

⁵³⁹ Manning J. Dauer, “Recent Southern Political Thought,” *Journal of Politics* 10 (May 1948): 338.

⁵⁴⁰ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 250-51.

hurrah, and the formation of the Progressive Party only served to highlight the divisiveness among popular-front liberals.⁵⁴¹

True to form, Virginia Durr remained untroubled by the red-baiting of Henry Wallace and the PPA. She, like Wallace, never took the Soviet threat seriously. In part, it may have been due to Cliff's trip to Russia for a communications conference in 1946. Cliff's experience in Russia was a positive one, and although he felt it might be "un-American" to say, he admitted he liked the Russians. He wrote Virginia that "if they [the Russians] have any hostile feeling toward Americans they do a good job of hiding it. My suspicions are being confirmed that they are another great American myth."⁵⁴² He felt that the communications conference was a success and that "if we could get along in political conferences as well as we do in technical, the world would look pretty bright."⁵⁴³ Neither of the Durrs could understand how a country so war-torn could have the resources to launch a major offensive against the United States. Virginia feared that the United States would embark on an unjustified preventative war with the Soviet Union.⁵⁴⁴

Durr joined the Wallace-for-President organization as the chairman of the Northern Virginia Provisional Committee in April of 1948. She stated that Wallace was a "personal friend" and that she supported his foreign and domestic policies. When asked if her politics would affect her husband's position in Washington, she claimed she "resented" such talk and that she could not speak for her husband's political views.⁵⁴⁵ As chairman of the Wallace Committee for Virginia, Durr worked to raise money for the

⁵⁴¹ McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left*, 41.

⁵⁴² Cliff Durr to Virginia Durr, 14 October 1946, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 4.

⁵⁴³ Cliff Durr to Virginia Durr, 9 October 1946, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 4.

⁵⁴⁴ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 215, 202; Durr, interview with Reed, 21.

⁵⁴⁵ "FCC Chief's Wife to Stump for Henry Wallace," newspaper clipping, 22 April 1948, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 4.

campaign, particularly from the North. She argued that “it is imperative that the Wallace movement in the South receives subsidies from their more affluent Northern neighbors.”⁵⁴⁶ Like many Wallace followers, Durr supported him as the only alternative to a rather dismal choice of presidential prospects. With the Byrd machine in control in the state of Virginia, and weak support of the Republican Party there, Durr decided to go full force with the Wallace campaign and include her own name on the ballot. Virginia ran as the Progressive Party candidate for Senate against A. Willis Robertson.⁵⁴⁷ The reason for running for office, Virginia recalled, was to make the local newspapers include Wallace’s name. She claimed that the local press completely ignored Wallace, so, by running local candidates, like herself and Sarah D’Avila, who worked with Durr on the NCAPT, the newspapers would be forced to mention the PPA and Henry Wallace.⁵⁴⁸

The Progressive Party’s work was substantial, especially given that Wallace took little interest in his own party. Wallace would often leave in the middle of a PPA board meeting—“he didn’t want to be troubled with any kind of details. He just wanted to get up there and make his speech.”⁵⁴⁹ Virginia struggled with the campaign, making speeches and attending Wallace’s rallies, which sometimes lasted until almost midnight. During the presidential race, Wallace once again refused to address a segregated audience; furthermore, he traveled with a black secretary, visited African-American

⁵⁴⁶ Virginia Durr to Paul Trilling, 16 April 1948, SCHW Papers, box 34, folder 13.

⁵⁴⁷ “Five Virginia Parties to Argue Merits at ‘Town Meeting,’” *Washington Post*, 25 October 1948, 6; Virginia had become a citizen of the state of Virginia after she was elected president of the Northern Virginia Parent-Teacher Association. Cliff did not become a citizen of the state (Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 197).

⁵⁴⁸ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 209.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 211; “Arlington Woman Seeks Smith Seat as Progressive,” *Washington Post*, 29 September 1948, 2; Sarah D’Avila ran for the House of Representatives against incumbent Howard W. Smith.

schools, and refused to eat at restaurants that did not serve blacks.⁵⁵⁰ It was a bold, if not dangerous, political statement.

Virginia's family did not champion Wallace or Durr's admiration for him. Cliff understood Virginia's unwavering support for Wallace, but did not campaign himself. While Cliff admired Wallace and had a good relationship with him, Cliff refused to vote in the 1948 election for lack of viable candidates. Despite Cliff's personal unwillingness to support Wallace publicly, his name appeared on a "We are for Wallace" ad in the *New York Times*. His inclusion clearly indicated the post-war idea that a woman's political affiliation was intrinsically linked to her husband's. Hugo Black chastised Virginia for abandoning the Democratic Party. According to Virginia, Josephine adored Wallace, and they shared many ideas about mysticism together. Nevertheless, Hugo would not tolerate his wife's support of Wallace in a third party presidential race.⁵⁵¹ Virginia's support of Wallace was a type of political declaration of independence. No longer linked in political affiliation or sympathies with her husband or brother-in-law, Durr found a sense of freedom and autonomy of both mind and will. Yet, with the emerging Cold War domestic policies of female subservience, she was also the "errant" woman. Independence had a price. According to Virginia, "I was the only one in the entire family who was for Henry Wallace. It was mighty lonesome, I'm telling you."⁵⁵²

Virginia's campaign for Wallace and her own candidacy in the state of Virginia brought her once again to the attention of the FBI. The FBI shared the opinion of many Wallace critics that the Communist Party dominated and controlled the PPA. Of

⁵⁵⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 196; MacDougall, *Gideon's Army*, vol 3, 731; "The South Gets Rough with Wallace," *Life*, 13 September 1948, 33.

⁵⁵¹ Clifford Durr to Hugo Black, 10 March 1966, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 10; "We are for Wallace," *New York Times*, 20 October 1948, 32; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 196, 219.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 196.

particular concern to the FBI was Virginia's relationship, and subsequently her influence, on Justice Hugo Black. According to a report by an un-named informant, an ex-member of the Communist Party,

In my opinion a study of foreign directed espionage in the United States should not overlook the friends, associates and acquaintances of Mrs. Clifford Durr of Alexandria, Virginia. . . .I do not imply any deliberate disloyalty to the country and international subversive activities on her part. However, I know that her belief in working with 'Leftists', including the Communist party, at one time enabled the party to utilize her and her relationship with Justice Black.⁵⁵³

The informant further stated that Virginia's sympathies with Communist-front organizations may have led her to be used, without her knowledge, to obtain information by Soviet agents.⁵⁵⁴ FBI agents noted that many of Durr's friends, particularly Vito Marcantonio, were either suspected Soviet agents or members of the Communist Party. The Bureau compiled an extensive list of activities and groups in which Virginia was involved, such as the SCHW, the NCAPT, Highlander Folk School, the National Citizens Political Action Committee, the National Negro Congress, and the National Peace Mobilization. Not only did the Bureau investigate her activities, informants provided supposed statements and comments that Durr made, including her enthusiasm at the Progressive Party convention.⁵⁵⁵ Durr was noted for being "extremely active in

⁵⁵³ Memorandum, "Mrs. Clifford Durr," 7 September 1948, VFD FBI files, 2.

⁵⁵⁴ "Mrs. Clifford Durr," 7 September 1948, VFD FBI files, 2.

⁵⁵⁵ "Mrs. Clifford Judkins Durr, nee Virginia Heard Foster," n.d., VFD FBI file, 1-14; FBI Report, "Mrs. Clifford J. Durr," 11 February 1949, VFD FBI file, 9.

Progressive Party and information obtained revealed her adherence to CP line.”⁵⁵⁶ An informer also advised the FBI that both Virginia and her sister, Josephine, were “pinkish.” Consequently, the Bureau obtained photographs of Durr for their records and included her name in their security index card file.⁵⁵⁷

After the 1948 convention, Virginia and Cliff took a trip to Poland, Virginia’s first time abroad. Once again, the FBI followed the Durr’s activities.⁵⁵⁸ One-World Award sponsored the trip, and the purpose was to honor Fiorello La Guardia for his work in the United Nations’ Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. In ill health, La Guardia could not attend, and a committee chose representatives, among them Cliff, to accept the award in La Guardia’s stead. Virginia wore her Wallace button throughout her trip; although she was often greeted with “Mr. Wallace, l’Homme de Paix” [the man of peace], she also found that many Communists, the Russians in particular, viewed Wallace and the CPUSA as worthless and ineffectual. In Poland, Virginia discovered that the Cold War rhetoric was not limited to the United States. The Russians who attended the conference regarded America as aggressors whose goal was to conquer Europe and the world. Ilya Ehrenburg focused his scorn on Virginia Durr, including her in his harangue about Southern racists. Ehrenburg told Durr, “What is the Progressive Party? Nothing! Who in the United States that counts is in the Progressive Party? Nobody! What do you few liberals in the South do? Nothing!” Virginia recalled, “I wish I could express to you the scorn, the contempt and the accusation in Ehrenburg’s voice.”⁵⁵⁹ Durr’s experience

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 1; as the FBI reports were obtained by informants, the accuracy of the information is questionable.
⁵⁵⁷ SAC, Chicago, to Director, FBI, 5 January 1948, CJD FBI files; SAC, Richmond, to J. Edgar Hoover, 27 October 1948, VFD FBI file; Guy Hottel to Director, FBI, 23 November 1948, VFD FBI file, 2. During this period, Cliff was also reinvestigated by the FBI, particularly for his criticism of the Bureau and J. Edgar Hoover.

⁵⁵⁸ “Mrs. Clifford J. Durr,” 11 February 1949, 14.

⁵⁵⁹ Virginia Durr, as quoted in MacDougall, *Gideon’s Army*, vol. 3, 700.

in Russia only confirmed her beliefs that Communism was not the answer to America's problems.

The Durrs did not meet opposition everywhere, however, and for the most part, the trip was a pleasant experience. In Paris, Virginia and Cliff attended a Communist meeting out of curiosity, although Cliff really wanted to go the Folies Bergere. Yet, Virginia returned to the U.S. frustrated by the encounters—"Here we were trying to keep people from dropping atomic bombs on them, and I thought they might at least have said, 'Well, we appreciate your efforts, even if you don't succeed'."⁵⁶⁰ Yet, the encouragement from some of the French, Poles, and Italians made Virginia even more committed to the Wallace campaign. She felt that it was necessary to "show the rest of the world that the spark of humanity was still alive [in the United States], and that the dreadful Truman and his gang and the dreadful atomic threats were not all of American life."⁵⁶¹

Returning home, Virginia threw herself into the Wallace campaign. Durr recalled that the general attitude of the public during her campaign was that she was "a Russian spy at least."⁵⁶² In Arlington, Virginia, Durr concentrated on foreign policy in a speech she made before the Organized Women Voters. Virginia assured the audience that the Soviet Union's economy was so devastated by World War II, that they in no way would be able to wage a war against the United States. Communism, Virginia argued, arose out of a poverty-stricken nation, in which the poor became so desperate they took from the wealthy and divided it among themselves. During the course of the campaign, the independent candidate for the Senate seat in Virginia, Howard H. Carwile, challenged

⁵⁶⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 197.

⁵⁶¹ Virginia Durr, as quoted in MacDougall, *Gideon's Army*, vol. 3, 701.

⁵⁶² Virginia Durr to Henry Wallace, Wallace Papers, MsC 177, Box 37.

Durr, stating that the Progressive Party was no longer holding integrated meetings.

While Durr did participate in some public debates during the campaign, most of her speaking was before church groups, to predominantly African-American audiences.⁵⁶³

On the campaign trail, foreign policy was often the focus of Wallace's speeches, and at times, Wallace demonstrated his naiveté in world affairs. In New Brunswick, New Jersey, Wallace told supporters, "Ingrid Bergman [who was having marital problems] and her husband have met. Why can't Truman and Stalin?"⁵⁶⁴ Wallace went on extensive tours of the South during his campaign. There, he campaigned against the poll tax, spoke against Jim Crow, and promoted federal funding for the building of schools, hospitals, and industry.⁵⁶⁵

While most of the Southern rallies were peaceful and all were desegregated, the Wallace campaign encountered fierce opposition in North Carolina. In Durham, a Wallace supporter was stabbed eight times, and Wallace had to be escorted by national guardsmen to the podium. In Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Burlington, barrages of eggs, tomatoes, and ice cream met Wallace while he spoke. Local police in North Carolina, as in other parts of the South, often refused to provide protection, claiming that Wallace was causing the trouble. In Durr's hometown of Birmingham, Alabama a hostile mob almost overturned Wallace's motorcade.⁵⁶⁶ Yet, Wallace's Southern campaign was significant, for it "brought forth showers of hatred, abuse, and vilification seldom heaped upon a presidential candidate—third party or not....the most enduring damage was . . .to

⁵⁶³ "Women Voters Hear Speeches of Candidates," *Washington Post*, 21 October 1948, B5; " 'Real' Unsegregation Sought by Carwile," *Washington Post*, 21 September 1948, 3; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 199-200.

⁵⁶⁴ Straight, "Days of Hope," 11.

⁵⁶⁵ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 250.

⁵⁶⁶ "The South Gets Rough," 33-35; Schmidt, *Quixotic Crusade*, 205-06; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 266.

American political tradition.”⁵⁶⁷ Wallace’s challenge to segregation and racism foreshadowed the violent reactionary years of the Civil Rights Movement and demonstrated to Americans outside the South how entrenched Jim Crow remained and how virulent the system’s defenders would be.

No one, including Wallace, expected a victory. Yet, the final results were still disappointing. By the eve of the election, support for Wallace had declined dramatically. Even within his own party there was dissent. To Wallace’s frustration, Beanie Baldwin failed to chastise PPA liberals who withdrew from the race in an effort to prevent a third-party split among the Democrats. Black constituents, to whom Wallace hoped to appeal because of his denunciations of Jim Crow, often remained in the Democratic Party.⁵⁶⁸ According to one reporter, many black leaders felt Wallace did more harm to their cause than good; furthermore, “there was no point in voting for a sure loser.”⁵⁶⁹ Not all liberals abandoned Wallace, although many recognized the futility of their support. I.F. Stone wrote in August of 1948, “I’m just a poor dupe who can’t take either Dewey or Truman, and is longing for an effective way to cast a protest vote against cold war, high prices, and hysteria.”⁵⁷⁰ Although ever the optimist, Virginia Durr’s expectations were realistic. She recalled that “it never crossed my mind that [the Progressive Party] would win. . . .all we were doing was just putting some stumbling blocks into the way of the Cold War, we thought.”⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁷ Schmidt, *Quixotic Crusade*, 208.

⁵⁶⁸ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 262; “Wallace’s Strength Appears to be Slipping,” *Washington Post*, 22 October 1948, 9; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 250.

⁵⁶⁹ “The South Gets Rough,” 35.

⁵⁷⁰ I.F. Stone, “Confessions of a Dupe: Why I Was for Wallace,” in *The Truman Era* (New York: Random House, 1953): 68.

⁵⁷¹ Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 202, 207.

Nevertheless, Wallace received no electoral votes and carried only 2.38 percent of the national total. The amount fell way below the original estimate of 3 to 4 million votes. Virginia Durr received 5,347 votes, ranking behind the Democratic, Republican, and Independent candidates. The only Progressive candidate to win in 1948 was Vito Marcantonio. The election practically destroyed both Wallace's political career, as well as the Progressive Party.⁵⁷²

The defeat of Henry Wallace signified a new direction in American liberalism. The post-1948 liberalism no longer embraced the popular-front politics that had characterized it during the 1930s. Communists, leftists, and fellow travelers were purged from liberal ranks, replaced with a coalition that was more responsive to, if not also wary of, the Cold War political climate. In the process, these "new liberals," forewent "many traditional liberal tenants—the belief in progress, in man's goodness, in popular democracy, and in world peace . . . the new liberals identified not with the left . . . but with the center; they identified not with the people, but with an elite."⁵⁷³ Yet, at the same time, the campaign of 1948 also pushed the issue of civil rights to the national forefront. Not since Reconstruction had civil rights issues figured so prominently in a presidential campaign. Thus, "once almost the private domain of negro protest groups, leftist clergymen, and Communist-dominated unions and front organizations, civil rights became part of the agenda of respectable urban liberalism in 1948."⁵⁷⁴

Virginia continued her nominal support of the Progressive Party until it collapsed in the early 1950s. In 1950, she wrote Wallace,

⁵⁷² Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 461; William Graf, comp., *Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Elections of November 2, 1948* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1949), microfilm, 1672, reel 1; Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 503.

⁵⁷³ McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left*, 63.

⁵⁷⁴ Sitkoff, "Harry Truman," 615.

It must be awful and very lonely to be a Prophet—but like Joshua (was it Joshua?) I think you made the sun stand still—and saved us from the holocaust so far. I don't think the danger is over by any means—but we have gained a breathing space. I hope your strength will be renewed.⁵⁷⁵

Yet, when Wallace broke with the Progressive Party over his support of the Korean War, Virginia became disillusioned with him. Wallace began to regard the PPA as a pro-Russian group, and he criticized the Soviet Union more than ever.⁵⁷⁶ I.F. Stone argued that Wallace moved to the right and warned that a purging of “reds” from the PPA would “fatally compromise the whole fight for civil liberties in this country.”⁵⁷⁷ Wallace finally broke with the PPA in 1950. His support for Republican Dwight Eisenhower and his personal relationship with Richard Nixon in the 1960s only served to compound Virginia Durr's growing contemptuousness.

Durr, like many PPA supporters, felt that their sacrifice and work meant little to Wallace in the end. Durr recalled an incident before Wallace's death in 1965 when her daughter Lucy met Wallace at Radcliffe. Lucy introduced herself and reminded him that her mother supported him for president in 1948. According to Durr, he responded by telling Lucy that Virginia gave him bad advice. Durr exclaimed, “I gave Henry Wallace bad advice! . . . he blamed everybody but himself. I lost all my respect and affection for him.”⁵⁷⁸ Virginia also recalled taking Wallace to lunch, along with I.F. Stone a few years after the election. She claimed that he never offered his gratitude or took any interest in their lives. Wallace, according to Virginia, offered “just one long complaint

⁵⁷⁵ Virginia Durr to Henry Wallace, May 1950, Wallace Papers, MsC 177, box 37.

⁵⁷⁶ Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 521.

⁵⁷⁷ I.F. Stone, “Progressive Capitalism and Third Party Tactics,” in *Truman Era*, 157.

⁵⁷⁸ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 199.

about how he had been treated and how vicious it was and how unfair.”⁵⁷⁹ Nevertheless, in 1950, Wallace did offer his thanks to both Virginia and Cliff for their support:

No two names mean more to the Progressive movement than Clifford and Virginia Durr. With utmost sincerity, courage, and enthusiasm they have fought effectively for human rights, knowing that in the long run the rights of the more fortunate are measured by the rights of the least.⁵⁸⁰

Despite Virginia’s disenchantment with Wallace, she stated more than thirty years later, “I don’t think I was wrong. I still think that Henry was right and that Harry Truman was wrong, and I believe it to this day and hour.”⁵⁸¹ After all, she laughingly explained, “I’m a Presbyterian, you know. I knew that I was right.”⁵⁸²

With the Wallace campaign over, the Durrs returned to making a living in Washington. Cliff opened his law practice in the fall of 1948. He hoped a previous offer for a teaching position at Yale would be renewed, but it never was. Cliff continued to speak against the Loyalty Oath and defend civil liberties, particularly freedom of speech. Although the Durrs had high expectations for Cliff’s practice, the majority of his clients were victims of the loyalty program. Cliff’s outspoken criticism of the Loyalty Oath earned him a reputation in Washington, and people who suffered under the program quickly sought his aid. Although Cliff had hoped to work with radio networks in his

⁵⁷⁹ Durr, interview with Marie Jemison, 4.

⁵⁸⁰ Henry Wallace, memo, 24 May 1950, Wallace Papers, MsC 177, box 37.

⁵⁸¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 201.

⁵⁸² Durr, interview with Thrasher and Hall, 222. A few years after the Wallace campaign, Virginia recalled an incident in which a fellow train passenger, who had worked for the State Department, mistook her for a Southern conservative. He told her that during the 1948 campaign, Truman backed off from a possible preventative war with the Japanese and Russia. He told her the reason was that Truman was afraid of losing support to Henry Wallace if the U.S. went to war. From that conversation, Virginia felt vindicated in her support for Wallace. (see Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 200).

practice, he became bombarded with loyalty oath cases, many of which involved Communists, and the work with the communications venue never materialized. Most of Cliff's clients had either been fired or had little source of income; consequently, few of the defendants paid. Cliff not only defended loyalty oath cases; he also represented clients called to appear before HUAC. One of the most publicized hearings of Cliff's legal career in Washington involved Frank J. Oppenheimer.⁵⁸³

In 1949, the House Committee on Un-American Activities subpoenaed Frank Oppenheimer, brother of Robert Oppenheimer, one of the creators of the atomic bomb, and Frank's wife, Jacquenette. HUAC's investigation of the Oppenheims was directed at the possible espionage at University of California at Berkeley's radiation laboratory, where Frank had worked for a time with his brother. The Oppenheims joined the Communist Party in 1937 but cut their ties with the Party by 1940. Through Robert Oppenheimer, whom Cliff had met at Princeton, Cliff agreed to take the case.⁵⁸⁴ Cliff said of Oppenheimer, "if he is 'disloyal,' then the country needs more 'disloyal' people of his type—a brilliant scientist and a very fine character."⁵⁸⁵ When the Oppenheims appeared before HUAC in June of 1949, they talked openly of their past Communist affiliation, but denied any role in espionage. Although HUAC failed to press charges against the couple, Frank found, like most victims of the HUAC investigations, professional opportunities closed to him. Oppenheimer lost his job and could not obtain a passport.⁵⁸⁶ During the hearing, the Durrs established a friendship with the

⁵⁸³ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 126-131; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 219-221; Jack F. Curtis to Clifford Durr, telegram, 31 July 1949, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 10; Clifford Durr to Eric Stevenson, 21 November 1949, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 11.

⁵⁸⁴ "Oppenheimer," newspaper clipping, *The Evening Star*, 14 June 1949, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 14; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 131-133; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 225-227.

⁵⁸⁵ Clifford Durr to Lucy Judkins Durr, 20 June 1949, CJD Papers, box 6, folder 1.

⁵⁸⁶ Frank Oppenheimer to Dean Acheson, 20 February 1950, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 14.

Oppenheimers, and Frank wrote Cliff, thanking him for his help, saying “although I can remember many incidents in Washington, the only flavor that remains of the trip is the warm one of your friendship.”⁵⁸⁷

Although Cliff’s practice took most of his time, he also taught at Princeton on the weekends. In addition, he joined, and became president of, the National Lawyers Guild in 1949. Founded in 1937, the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) provided an alternative to the segregated American Bar Association and “served as a last outpost of the prewar liberal-radical alliance.”⁵⁸⁸ Given Clifford Durr’s unwavering support for civil liberties and his protest against the Loyalty Act, it was only natural he should gravitate to the organization. Yet, by the late 1940s, the government regarded the NLG as a subversive organization, and many of its members were Communists or Communist-sympathizers. The NLG’s spent much of its efforts and funds defending Communists in court.⁵⁸⁹ The NLG also criticized the FBI’s illegal wiretapping and surveillance, and Clifford Durr, as president of the NLG, pressured Truman to investigate the Bureau.⁵⁹⁰ The NLG’s almost eight-hundred page account of the FBI’s activities, “Report on the Alleged Practices of the FBI,” marked it as an enemy to J. Edgar Hoover, as well as to HUAC.⁵⁹¹ Consequently, HUAC labeled the NLG, “the foremost legal bulwark of the Communist Party, its front organizations, and controlled unions.”⁵⁹² Not only did the NLG oppose the FBI’s illegal investigations, the organization vehemently criticized the Communist accusations of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy.

⁵⁸⁷ Frank Oppenheimer to Cliff Durr, 20 June 1949, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 14.

⁵⁸⁸ Percival R. Bailey, “The Case of the National Lawyers Guild, 1939-1958,” in *Beyond the New Deal the Hiss Case: The FBI, Congress, and the Cold War*, ed. Athan G. Theoharis, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982): 132.

⁵⁸⁹ Woods, *Black Struggle*, 205.

⁵⁹⁰ Bailey, “The Case,” 136.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 142-146.

⁵⁹² “The National Lawyers Guild: Legal Bulwark of Democracy,” Fall 1950, CJD Papers, box 25, folder 8.

Elected to the Senate in 1946, Joseph McCarthy had failed to distinguish himself among his colleagues until 1950. During that year, McCarthy claimed to have a list of Communists in the State Department, thereby beginning a four-year period of accusations, threats, and speculation by the Wisconsin Senator. The press, more than his believers, ensured that McCarthy and “McCarthyism” remained in the public eye until his censure in 1954.⁵⁹³ Clifford Durr openly denounced McCarthy, writing a letter to the *Washington Post* characterizing McCarthy’s behavior as “irresponsible,” claiming that the Senator was merely trying to “further his political fortunes and those of his party.”⁵⁹⁴ Durr’s attack gained attention on the floor of the House of Representatives, when Republican Thomas Harold Werdel from California asserted,

[Cliff’s] letter is typical of the organized smear of Senator McCarthy that is now going on throughout the country. . . . in addition to heading the National Lawyers Guild, Durr has found time for many other activities in behalf of communism. . . . he has called the FBI a super-snooping agencyPaul Crouch, a former Communist-Party official testified. . . that he had seen Durr at a secret national conference in New York of top members of the Communist Party and the Communist underground. As long as people like Clifford Durr continue their smears of Senator McCarthy, I think Senator McCarthy must be on the right track.⁵⁹⁵

Despite having been called a Communist in the House of Representatives, Durr stood by his analysis of McCarthy: “My remarks concerning Senator McCarthy’s behavior were

⁵⁹³ Fried, *Nightmare in Red*, 124.

⁵⁹⁴ Clifford J. Durr to Herbert Elliston, 17 March 1950, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 1.

⁵⁹⁵ *Congressional Record*, 22 March 1950, fragment, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 1, 3912-3913.

made in the open and I assume full personal responsibility for them. Congressman Werdel's attack on me was made from behind the shield of Congressional immunity."⁵⁹⁶

While Cliff battled HUAC and McCarthy, Virginia, for her part, felt rather lost during 1949. She said she went through "some pretty rough times" resulting from her support of Wallace.⁵⁹⁷ The SCHW had disbanded, Wallace had been defeated, the NCAPT was making little gain, and the Durrs watched as HUAC called some of their friends and associates to testify.⁵⁹⁸ Of the most publicized cases of the period, none drew as much attention, or seemed to solidify Communist fears, as much as the Alger Hiss case. Alger Hiss, the epitome of the "self-confident, left-wing, East Coast, Ivy League, New Deal bureaucrat," had worked both in the Department of Agriculture and in the State Department during the 1930s and 1940s.⁵⁹⁹ In 1947, he quit the State Department to work as president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. On the testimony of Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist turned informer, HUAC subpoenaed Hiss, charged with passing top State Department information to the Soviets, to appear in 1947. During the course of the investigation, Chambers led investigators to Hiss's Maryland home to uncover secret documents in a hollowed-out pumpkin. The "pumpkin papers," ostensibly led to charges of perjury against Hiss, while simultaneously boosting the political career of the head HUAC investigator, Richard Nixon. In 1950, a jury found Hiss guilty of perjury and sentenced him to five years in prison.

⁵⁹⁶ Clifford Durr, "Statement," 23 March 1950, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 1.

⁵⁹⁷ Durr, interview with Marie Jemison, 4.

⁵⁹⁸ The NCAPT continued to push for anti-poll tax legislation; however, the proponents were not as ardent as in the early 1940s. The threat of a filibuster remained and seemed an insurmountable obstacle.

⁵⁹⁹ Cate, *Great Fear*, 59.

While the Durrs and the Hisses were only acquaintances, Virginia found him to be an “attractive and charming fellow.”⁶⁰⁰ According to Virginia, they knew Alger only slightly because “[the Hisses] moved in the Dean Acheson-Georgetown-State Department crowd, which was far more fashionable than the Seminary Hill-New Deal crowd.”⁶⁰¹ Nevertheless, the Durrs were appalled by the hearings. Cliff wrote to Hiss,

I am writing to say I’m sorry. I am sorry for my country. There is a sickness in it when a man can be sentenced to prison for perjury on the testimony of an admitted perjurer, a mentally sick renegade from the Communist Party. . . .I would feel safer with the fate of my country in the hands of men like Alger Hiss, indicted as a perjurer and convicted as a traitor, than in the hands of the men responsible for his indictment and prosecution.⁶⁰²

To many liberals in Washington, the message was becoming clear—either disassociate oneself from liberal and/or radical causes, or be prepared to suffer the consequences. In an article for *The Nation*, Clifford Durr once again criticized the loyalty program and asked readers, “is the issue of our time really democracy versus communism? Is this the era of the ‘Fair Deal’?”⁶⁰³ From 1947 until the end of the McCarthy era in the mid-1950s, a period which historian David Caute terms the “great fear,” the prevailing threat was “not only over acts but also contagion, a pestilence of the mind. . . .the key notion was guilt by association.”⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 203.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

⁶⁰² Clifford Durr to Alger Hiss, 23 January 1950, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 12.

⁶⁰³ Clifford J. Durr, “How to Measure Loyalty,” *The Nation*, 23 April 1949, 473.

⁶⁰⁴ Caute, *Great Fear*, 18.

Washington of 1949 was not the same as the Washington of 1933 when the Durrs arrived. Many of the New Deal liberals were gone. Henry Wallace, who had resigned from government in 1946, was the last of the original New Dealers. Virginia felt most of their old friends had either left Washington or buckled under anti-Communist pressure. Lee Pressman, who had worked with Virginia on the Wallace campaign, appeared before HUAC and incriminated many of his associates in the Department of Agriculture. In response, Virginia wrote Beanie Baldwin,

I think after Lee that nothing along the line of betrayal will surprise me. . . . There are so few of [our old friends] that have not succumbed to some form of blandishment—and they all rationalize in some form or other to excuse themselves, and the more they rationalize the more they hate the “Reds”.⁶⁰⁵

The repressive climate of post-war Washington affected many politicians and bureaucrats who had worked in the New Deal or other government agencies. There was a sense of suspicion, caution, and general uneasiness among those in government. Psychoanalysts reported a rise in mental illness among government employees during the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁶⁰⁶ The rising tension also affected the Durrs. According to Virginia, “it was a kind of save-yourself time.”⁶⁰⁷ Cliff wrote that “with the secrecy and hysteria which surrounds the whole Loyalty Program, no one can be sure of anything.”⁶⁰⁸

By 1950, the Durrs were struggling financially. Cliff’s law practice was far from prosperous, and other clients stayed away from Cliff’s practice because of his defense of

⁶⁰⁵ Virginia Durr to Beanie Baldwin, 12 April 1951, Baldwin Papers, series I, box 5.

⁶⁰⁶ Cate, *Great Fear*, 275.

⁶⁰⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 238.

⁶⁰⁸ Clifford J. Durr to Jerry Tallmer, 14 December 1949, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 11.

loyalty cases.⁶⁰⁹ Most academic avenues had closed to Cliff, and, to help with the bills, Virginia took a job teaching English to immigrants—“one day’s work was enough to pay the maid’s salary.”⁶¹⁰ The Durrs also became increasingly disenchanted with Washington. In 1949 Cliff wrote, “maybe Washington is a poor place in which to judge the country as a whole, but here, it seems to me, that the number of people who are willing to say what is on their minds is growing fewer and fewer.”⁶¹¹ Although Cliff wanted to return to Alabama, Virginia emphatically did not. She feared the explosive racial situation in Alabama, and, quite possibly, the social ostracism that would ensue, knowing Virginia’s fight for civil rights and her support of Henry Wallace. Thus, when Jim Patton, the president of the National Farmers Union, wrote Cliff about an opening in Denver, Colorado, Cliff agreed to take the position.

The Durrs moved to Denver in the summer of 1950. Cliff took a job as general counsel of the Farmers’ Union Insurance Corporation. The National Farmers’ Union (NFU) emerged as a defender of the small landowner and extoller of agrarian virtues. During the 1940s, the NFU worked to build a farm-labor coalition, and Cliff viewed the NFU as “a liberal, if not radical, organization.”⁶¹² More importantly, the NFU opposed the loyalty program. However, before the Durrs moved to Denver, anti-Communism began affecting the NFU as well, and it moved increasingly to the center and away from radical causes. After a brief stop in Alabama, the Durrs started West. Along the way, the Durrs learned of the emerging U.S. war in Korea.⁶¹³

⁶⁰⁹ Clifford Durr to Lucy Judkins Durr, 20 June, 1949, DF Papers, box 6, folder 1; Clifford Durr to Irving Bryant, 20 March, 1963, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 8.

⁶¹⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 222.

⁶¹¹ Clifford Durr to Mrs. Harper Sibley, 7 February 1949, CJD Papers, box 1, folder 8.

⁶¹² Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 33-34; Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 18, folder 3.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 145.

For a time, the Durrs lived with friends of Hugo Black, the Whatleys, before buying a home of their own. Virginia disliked having to live with another family, as kind as they were. Virginia missed her own space, her servants, and her garden. The Durrs' financial situation failed to improve, however. Before the family left for Colorado, Cliff started working on a book he contracted with a publisher in New York. It was to be on 'loyalty and security'; however, with the escalation of the Korean War, the publisher backed out. Unfortunately, Cliff had agreed to take half-pay for his work in the NFU so that he could write. When the book contract fell through, the NFU held him to his original salary.⁶¹⁴

The time in Denver challenged the Durrs on almost every account. Virginia did not feel 'at home' in Denver. She wrote, "I really love the looks of the West although I don't feel at home in such vastness."⁶¹⁵ More importantly, Virginia felt isolated from the SCEF and its work and was concerned that her departure would end her term on the SCEF board. She told Dombrowski that "I would hate to give up my position on the Board when my affiliation with the Southern Conference has meant [sic] more to me than anything else in my life."⁶¹⁶ The war in Korea was another concern. Virginia felt the United States was fighting a senseless war and the anti-Communism campaign was nothing more than "silliness"; for their part, the Durrs were just trying to "make a living and raise a Family and keep calm in the midst of it all."⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁴ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], n.d., VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 18, folder 3; Marie Jemison, unpublished manuscript on the Durrs, MJ Papers, box 1, folder 15.1.5, chapter 20.

⁶¹⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], n.d., VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶¹⁶ Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946.

⁶¹⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 1950, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

The trip cross-country exacerbated Cliff's back problem, which had bothered him for years. When he could barely walk, he underwent an operation to fuse the disks in his lower back, which put him in the hospital for almost a month. All of the money the Durrs received for the sale of their home on Seminary Hill went to pay the hospital bills, only compounding their financial troubles. Virginia stayed at home with the children and Cliff. The social activism to which she was so accustomed was lacking in Denver. Even if she had found an organization in which to become active, she had little time. The children were also frequently ill, and, after only a few months, Virginia was beginning to feel the strain. It was during Cliff's convalescence that Virginia received a petition in the mail which ultimately shortened their stay in Denver.⁶¹⁸

The postcard Virginia received was a peace petition, sponsored by the American Peace Crusade, asking if she agreed with the U.S. entry in Korea and McArthur's actions. The Committee who produced the mailing included Nobel Prize-winning scientist Linus Pauling, Philip Morrison of Cornell, and Utah Supreme Court Justice James Wolfe. Virginia, who was a long-time member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, opposed the war in Korea and feared a large-scale war with China. She told Clark and Mairi Foreman,

the whole intervention in Korea is a criminal adventure covered over with a pseudo letality [sic] that makes it even more disgusting and I think we are doomed to fail. . . .I think it is the natural outcome of the vicious Foreign Policy we are pursuing—and it makes me boil."⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁸ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 147; Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 234-236; Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 17, folder 16; Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 23.

⁶¹⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], n.d., VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

Virginia identified with the oppressed in Korea and China, although Cliff claimed she was feeling self-pity; nevertheless, “the identification is there. . . .I am really frightened for the first time about surviving this period.”⁶²⁰ Perhaps her identification had to do with her own feelings of oppression as a Southern woman. Fighting against the poll tax went hand-in-glove with obtaining voting rights for women. Virginia signed her name to the petition and returned the postcard. Unknowingly, by signing the card, she became a sponsor of the American Peace Crusade.⁶²¹

Cliff returned to work, still on crutches, to find that the NFU was struggling with Communist accusations from the Farm Bureau and from the Senate. In September of 1950, Senator Styles Bridges attacked the NFU on the Senate floor as a Communist-front organization dedicated to taking over farm associations. Specifically, Bridges claimed that the NFU was full of Communists and Communist-sympathizers. According to Bridges, one ‘sympathizer’ was Clifford Durr. In response to the accusations, the NFU reversed its position on the Korean War, supporting Truman and the administration’s foreign policy. The NFU, according to Cliff, then courted the political graces of Truman.⁶²²

In the midst of the NFU’s fight to clear its name, the *Denver Post*, a long-time critic of the NFU, ran a headline stating, “New ‘Front’ Here Backed by Reds; Demands Peace.” The article listed Mrs. Clifford Durr as one of the sponsors of the American Peace committee, a national group that followed “closely the Communist Party line,”

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 234-236.

⁶²² Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 17, folder 16; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 146-147.

according to the *Post*.⁶²³ The petition, which Virginia signed a few months earlier, was printed in full in the *Post*, and the article claimed that it circulated with full support from the Communist *Daily Worker*.⁶²⁴ The headline was exactly the type of publicity the NFU sought to avoid. Consequently, the head of the Insurance Corporation telephoned Virginia and told her that if she did not remove her signature, Cliff would lose his job. Virginia was willing to take her name off of the petition, (Cliff remarked, “you can’t believe how she has mellowed”) but the NFU wanted more.⁶²⁵ The Union prepared a statement for Virginia to sign, claiming that she was just a poor, weak woman, that the “reds,” like Linus Pauling, “duped” her into signing the petition. This, Virginia refused to sign. When Cliff read the statement, he told the Union, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that he would not “allow” his wife to sign such a confession. Cliff returned home, telling Virginia he supported her decision, and they warmly embraced.⁶²⁶ Virginia recalled, “when Cliff told me that, I fell into his arms. We had each other. That’s about all we had.”⁶²⁷ Shortly after, Cliff returned to the hospital for another back operation.

During their time in Denver, Virginia became subjected to, what Elaine Tyler May termed, the emerging “domestic containment” of the post-war era.⁶²⁸ The political activism and social reform embraced by many women during the 1930s was no longer acceptable by the 1950s. White middle class gender roles for females included political dependence and homemaking—not confronting controversial or political issues. The argument Kim Nielsen posits for the first Red Scare was also true of the second:

⁶²³ Robert M. Cour, “New ‘Front’ Here Backed by Reds; Demands Peace,” *Denver Post*, 21 February 1951, 1.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶²⁵ Clifford Durr to Hugh, 4 March 1951, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 3.

⁶²⁶ Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 17, folder 16; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 235-236.

⁶²⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 236.

⁶²⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

antifeminists argued that “U.S. women were well-intentioned but duped.”⁶²⁹ Women’s natural womanly kindness and blindness” ultimately led them to engage in actions that “would bring about Bolshevism.”⁶³⁰ That the NFU punished Cliff for his wife’s transgression was a telling commentary on how the post-war society viewed wives as their husbands’ “responsibility,” to control and to contain.

Virginia’s unwillingness to sign the NFU’s statement not only stemmed from personal pride, but also from not wanting to implicate others on the petition as Communists. In addition to Pauling and Morrison, some of Virginia’s closest associates were listed as sponsors, including Jim Dombrowski and Paul Robeson. She wrote Clark and Mairi Foreman, “there seems to be an enormous difference between having to be quiet and survive—and turning on your former associates and helping send them to their destruction.”⁶³¹ Virginia never questioned her decision. Self-respect was worth the price of unemployment and uncertainty, and Virginia felt that “few people today can afford the luxury of keeping their self-respect.”⁶³² Cliff shared her feelings. In a letter summarizing the scandal, he said,

The problem being quite simple, there was, of course, a quite simple answer to it. Virginia (my wife, not the state) could denounce peace and everybody who says he or she is for peace (except, of course, the F.U. and maybe, Mr. Truman) and everything would be all right again.

Or maybe I could denounce Virginia, and that would be even more

⁶²⁹ Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2001), 130.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶³¹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi Foreman, 30 November 1951, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶³² Virginia Durr to Beanie Baldwin, 12 April 1951, Baldwin Papers, series I, box 5.

simple. But Virginia didn't feel like denouncing anybody, except, perhaps the *Denver Post* and Palmer Hoyt, its publisher, and I didn't feel like denouncing Virginia, so the Red Queen said 'Off with his head,' so my head is off and I am not so confused any more. . . .⁶³³

Although Aubrey Williams, who worked for the NFU in Alabama, tried to mend the rift between the NFU and the Durrs, Cliff viewed the damage as irreparable.⁶³⁴

The Durrs considered suing the *Denver Post* for libel, but, in Cliff's condition, they were not up to the fight. Cliff, once a defender of those accused of disloyalty, was on the receiving end of the accusation. The *East Denver Journal*, did, however, come out in support of Clifford Durr, calling the anti-Communism scare a "witch hunt," and a threat to democracy. Cliff spoke openly of the reason the NFU fired him, blaming the NFU for cowing to anti-Communist attacks by both the *Denver Post* and the Farmer's Union.⁶³⁵

Furthermore, leaving Washington did not end the FBI surveillance of the Durrs. The Bureau reported on their move to Denver and the crisis over the peace petition. In April of 1951, Virginia had taken a trip to San Francisco to visit Decca (since married to Bob Treuhافت) and Marge Gelders, daughter of Joe Gelders. The FBI reported that Virginia intentionally contacted these "known Communists" during her stay.⁶³⁶ When the Durrs left Denver, the FBI forwarded Virginia's file to the Bureau's office in Mobile, Alabama.

⁶³³ Clifford Durr to Hugh Wilson, 4 March 1951.

⁶³⁴ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 149.

⁶³⁵ Clifford Durr to Justice James H. Wolfe, 24 April 1951, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 5; "Witch-Hunts UnAmerican," *East Denver Journal*, March 1957, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 3; "Durr Blames Firing on Denver Post Story," *Denver Post*, 31 May 1951, as reprinted in Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 237.

⁶³⁶ "Virginia Foster Durr—Security Matter C," 26 August 1952, VFD FBI file.

With Cliff still bed-ridden and unemployed, Cliff's mother came to stay with the Durrs. She insisted that the only solution to their financial problem was for them to return to Alabama until Cliff recovered. Cliff eagerly agreed. The NFU, in Cliff's mind once a great liberal organization, had proved a great disappointment. In Alabama, Cliff felt there were "no 'God Damned Liberals' to put up with. At least I knew if it got hit I would know where it was coming from and it is a great relief to KNOW who the sons of bitches are."⁶³⁷ Virginia was eager to go back to Alabama this time, concluding that "[Denver] is not our country and these are not our people."⁶³⁸ Even worse, Virginia told Cliff's mother that the people they encountered in Denver, particularly the NFU and the *Denver Post*, had "more bad manners than I ever ran up against in my life."⁶³⁹

⁶³⁷ Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 17, folder 6.

⁶³⁸ Virginia Durr to Ann Durr, 1951, as cited in Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 152.

⁶³⁹ Virginia Durr to Lucy Durr and Little Auntie, 1951, DF Papers, box 6, folder 2.

CHAPTER VII

A HEARING IN NEW ORLEANS

In 1952, playwright Arthur Miller wrote one of the defining works of the McCarthy era. *The Crucible* was a scathing critique of the anti-Communist hysteria which came to overshadow the late 1940s and 1950s, likening the hysteria to the Salem witch-craft trials of the 1690s. Despite the overwhelming literature on the second Red Scare, only a few scholars have focused on gender and how it operated during the period, and fewer still have examined the women accused of Communist conspiracy. As Carol Karlsen demonstrated with the witch-craft hysteria of the Puritan communities, women accused of Communism during the 1950s were often women who were defiant in the face of societal pressure to “contain” their activities to the home.⁶⁴⁰ In the early 1950s, Virginia Foster Durr was one of several women who faced an anti-Communist witch hunt that sought to purge respectable society of her influence by engaging in a personal smear campaign and unsubstantiated charges. How Durr handled herself during the inquiry says much about her construction of herself as well as how she manipulated her position as a Southern lady in the face of adversity.

⁶⁴⁰ See Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987).

Virginia Durr always hoped to pursue a literary career and often wrote poems and drafts of short stories. During the early 1940s, she drafted a short poem titled “Ignorance”:

Each man makes a prison of himself
And lives confined within these walls.
Bound down and shackled by his fears,
Condemned to loneliness, death and tears.
O! to strike down the walls that hold him bound
So that at last his spirit may soar forth-free
To know all his sad, dark fears to be
Only the shadows of things he could not see.⁶⁴¹

The poem foreshadowed the Durrs’ life in Montgomery during the early 1950s. Virginia felt that, moving home, meant a return to a society full of ignorance, which isolated her from the wider world. The Durrs would devote themselves, whether willingly or by circumstance, to breaking down the walls of bigotry and ignorance that surrounded the South in the years both before, and during, the Civil Rights Movement.

After a brief trip to Washington, D.C. to host the wedding of their eldest daughter Ann, the Durrs returned to Alabama and moved in with Cliff’s mother. It was a trying time for Virginia. Lucy Durr’s health and mind were failing, and she became obsessed with dying and sin. Furthermore, Virginia felt that Cliff’s family never fully approved of

⁶⁴¹ Virginia Durr to Margaret, n.d., SCEF Papers, box 26, folder 360.

her or her ideas, and she had to keep her feelings hidden.⁶⁴² According to Virginia, Lucy Durr was “about the most typical Southern lady of the old school you can imagine.”⁶⁴³ Cliff’s mother held fast to segregation and paternalism, claiming that the welfare of blacks was the responsibility of whites. Yet, Lucy Durr’s love for Cliff caused her to overlook Virginia’s transgressions and focus on caring for her son’s family.⁶⁴⁴ Life in Montgomery seemed detached from the rest of the country, as most of Virginia’s visitors focused on people long dead or “at least somnolent.”⁶⁴⁵ She found that old Alabama friends were either unaware or uninterested in what the Durrs did in Washington—“we might as well have spent our time away from Alabama in the Sahara Desert writing in the sand.”⁶⁴⁶ According to Virginia, living in Montgomery was like living “in a house with a storm raging outside and if I don’t look out of the window I don’t feel the force of it. . . . I sometimes feel cut off from the actual world.”⁶⁴⁷

Cliff’s back problem kept him bedridden for almost a year. To keep busy, Virginia studied typing and stenography at a secretarial school and hoped to obtain a job with the Civil Service. Lacking any professional experience, her prospects were dim. To alleviate her isolation, Virginia continued her correspondence with old friends, particularly Jim Dombrowski, Clark and Mairi Foreman, and Corliss Lamont.⁶⁴⁸ Not only did her letters allow her to keep in touch with all that she had left by moving back to

⁶⁴² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 6 March 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 241.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 1951, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁴⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 31 December 1951, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁴⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 1951.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

Alabama, they also “provided an outlet” for her “frustrated literary leanings.”⁶⁴⁹ Corliss Lamont continued to send Virginia books, many of which he authored, and they exchanged ideas, both literary and political.⁶⁵⁰ During the 1950s and 1960s, Virginia became a prolific letter-writer, maintaining her friendships and associations she developed while in Washington.⁶⁵¹ For her, they were a lifeline to the world outside of the South—a world she very much had to know still existed.

In later years, Virginia felt that the struggles of the early 1950s brought their family closer together. Cliff and Virginia, particularly, became allies against a hostile world. Troubling to Virginia, however, was the society in which she was raising her girls. Little changed since Virginia was a girl in Alabama—popularity, competition, and ‘sweet talk’ still remained the characteristics of a society girl. While Lucy embraced this life, Virginia worried for Tilla, who was much more forthright and sensitive. Perhaps Virginia saw much of herself in Tilla, who struggled to live up to the expectations of the ‘Southern belle.’⁶⁵² Virginia, who had once admired and revered the Southern belles of her childhood, now concluded that “when you come down to it basically [Southern girls] are trained to have a prostitute’s view of life, and I think love is almost as much degraded by the market competition.”⁶⁵³ Unlike her own mother, Virginia tried to make her girls

⁶⁴⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 14 April 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁵⁰ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 7 February 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178; Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 28 March 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178; Corliss Lamont to Virginia Durr, 2 May 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178.

⁶⁵¹ In 2003, Patricia Sullivan published a collection of Virginia Durr’s letters which covers the years 1954–1968. It an excellent source to read Virginia’s style of letter-writing and the issues she confronted during those years. See Patricia Sullivan, *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters From the Civil Rights Years*.

⁶⁵² Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Virginia Durr to Clark, Mairi, Joanie, Shelagh, and Geno, 23 December 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Lucy Durr-Hackney, interview with author; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 24 November 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

realize the superficiality of society life and to create an awareness among the Durr children about social issues and problems.

In December of 1951, Virginia once again faced personal tragedy. While sleeping, her sister, Josephine Black, died of heart failure. From her youth, Josephine suffered from depression, and Hugo often worried that Josephine might attempt suicide. To combat the symptoms of depression, Josephine relied on sedatives and sleeping pills. Virginia, too, suffered periodically from depression during her life. Yet, Virginia always regarded Josephine as a gentle, yet frail, spirit. Virginia thought that Hugo was often difficult to live with, and that the constant social engagements for which Josephine was responsible took their toll. Josephine's sensitivity, Virginia felt, made her unable to cope with life's problems.⁶⁵⁴ Soon after Josephine's death, Virginia reflected,

I think if Sister had ever been able to hate evil as I do she might have been saved—but she never could. And perhaps that is not the way to salvation—but at least it gives you an outward target for your angers and they are not turned inward.⁶⁵⁵

Virginia felt her sister's life, like her mother's, was a "tragedy."⁶⁵⁶

Apart from Josephine's death, life for the Durrs remained fairly peaceful until 1954. Virginia often reflected on her work with the NCAPT and the SCHW, and she very much longed to be a part of the 'struggle' again. Yet, the split among the remaining liberal core deeply troubled Virginia. She wrote Corliss Lamont, "my trouble seems to be that I adore too many people—that won't adore each other. . . .I think we would all do

⁶⁵⁴ Newman, *Hugo Black*, 308, 386-387; Lucy Durr-Hackney, interview with author; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 31 December 1951; Virginia Durr, interview with Marie Jemison.

⁶⁵⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 31 December 1951.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

much better if we were not so divided.”⁶⁵⁷ In Alabama, Virginia felt acute isolation from the liberal forces that she embraced in Washington. Unlike Cliff, Virginia did not feel at home in Montgomery. She claimed that “so often I have felt an outcast, and felt the bitterness and the frustration and the hatred, and wanted to tear down the walls that bound me.”⁶⁵⁸ The feeling of not belonging, or being “outside the magic circle,” became stronger in Alabama. It was during their return to Alabama that Virginia began to construct a new element to her identity—that of the outsider. Back home, she was isolated from others who shared her ‘radical’ ideas on race and politics, and the sense of being completely alone once again engulfed her.⁶⁵⁹ Regardless of the pain it caused, she remained convinced that “the place for all good Southerners is at home.”⁶⁶⁰

While in Montgomery, the Durrs re-established their friendship with Aubrey and Anita Williams. After a time with the National Farmers’ Union, Aubrey Williams settled in Montgomery to focus his energy on his magazine, *The Southern Farmer*, and on his work in the Southern Conference Educational Fund. Williams’s open denouncement of segregation, particularly his support of the “Declaration of Civil Rights” in 1948, caused his alienation by the white community.⁶⁶¹ Apart from the Williamses, the Durrs had few close friends who shared their views on race and civil rights. In the fall of 1953, after living more than a year in Alabama, Virginia wrote,

I think we are going to be doomed to the same isolation that Aubrey lives in. Personally I think people like us, at least a good number . . .

⁶⁵⁷ Durr to Lamont, 7 February 1952.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ Virginia Durr to Hugo Black, 25 January 1954, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8.

⁶⁶⁰ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 1953.

⁶⁶¹ Richard A. Reiman, “Aubrey Williams: A Southern New Dealer in the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Alabama Review* 43 (1990): 188-192.

have gone outside the tribe and broken the taboos and they won't take us back unless we do penance and confess our sins, and we don't and we won't so that is that too.⁶⁶²

Even their friendship with the Williams did not alleviate Virginia's feeling of isolation in the South and only served to cement her identity as an outsider in her own region.

In the Spring of 1952, Cliff opened his law practice, with the intention of specializing in civil law. Almost immediately, though the work of Aubrey Williams and E.D. Nixon, head of the Montgomery chapter of the NCCAP, Cliff began working on civil rights cases. Most involved jail-house beatings or blacks who had been charged exorbitant amounts of interest on loans. The Durr Drug Company, headed by Cliff's brother James, kept Durr on retainer, which helped pay the bills. Although Cliff focused his attention on Montgomery and tried to separate himself from national issues, he continued to be petitioned for advice on how to handle loyalty cases. While Cliff freely offered his advice and stratagems, he refused to engage in a national effort. When Clark Foreman asked Cliff to serve on the National Advisory Counsel for the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, Cliff refused.⁶⁶³

Financially, the Durrs continued to struggle while in Montgomery. They lived on "borrowed money" from Cliff's mother.⁶⁶⁴ Most of Cliff's clients were "poor as Job's turkey," and paid little, if at all.⁶⁶⁵ Virginia felt that, if they could just make a little money, life in Montgomery would not be so difficult. Financial hardship only increased

⁶⁶² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 16 September 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁶³ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 155; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 243; James H. Wolfe to Clifford Durr, 16 April 1953, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 5; Mary Jane Keene to Clifford Durr, 5 May 1953, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 5; Clark Foreman to Cliff Durr, 18 March 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Clark Foreman to Cliff Durr, 28 March 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁶⁴ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 24 November 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁶⁵ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 9 February 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

the feeling of being alienated from ‘respectable’ Montgomery society. The expense of teenage girls and establishing the law practice took its toll on their finances. Even more troubling to Virginia was the lack of money to support causes about which she felt strongly. Subscriptions to magazines such as the *Compass* were too expensive, and she relied on Corliss Lamont to send what he could.⁶⁶⁶ After two years in Montgomery, the financial situation improved little, and she told the Foremans, “I know the Lord chastith [sic] those whom he loveth, but I sometimes wish he did not love us so much.”⁶⁶⁷

In 1952, Virginia took a job with the State of Alabama as a clerk and typist, but quit the job after only a few months to help Cliff in his law practice. She found the work at the Insurance Division of the State of Alabama “dull work as can be imagined.”⁶⁶⁸ Virginia, still feeling an outsider who transgressed against her forefathers, claimed that the portrait of her great-grandfather, the first President of the Alabama Senate, “frowns at me as I pass through the Chamber.”⁶⁶⁹ Virginia also developed bursitis in her shoulder, which she attributed to “psycho-somatic” causes, and her work hours were not conducive for caring for children.⁶⁷⁰ Thus, she willingly gave up her job with the State to work for Cliff. Cliff was not as fond of the arrangement, as Virginia was less interested in her work and more interested in his cases. Yet, Cliff’s practice was not yet prospering, and hiring a secretary too expensive.⁶⁷¹ While Virginia still hoped for a better civil service job, she enjoyed working with Cliff and determined to make the best of life in

⁶⁶⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 16 September 1953; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 24 November 1953; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], n.d., VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Virginia Durr to Clark, Mairi, Joanie, Shelagh, and Geno, 23 December 1953.

⁶⁶⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 9 February 1953.

⁶⁶⁸ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 8 December 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁰ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 9 February 1953.

⁶⁷¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 243; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 14 April 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

Montgomery—“Cliff is determined to live and die in Dixie and here he has taken his stand, so I must make the best of it and I try to do it.”⁶⁷²

Establishing the law practice and raising three daughters consumed much of the Durrs’ time, and Virginia felt it necessary to resign from many of the organizations to which she had devoted so much of her energy. She resigned from the Women’s Division of the Democratic Party and from the Southern Conference Educational Fund.⁶⁷³ Resigning from the SCEF was a difficult decision for Virginia. It was her last break from the SCHW and her years in Washington. Yet, the experience in Denver jaded and tempered Virginia, as she became hesitant to involve herself in any controversial organizations that might hurt Cliff’s business.⁶⁷⁴ She told Jim Dombrowski, “let me back Cliff up for a while, and not put him into the position where he has to back me up.”⁶⁷⁵ To Aubrey Williams, the newly elected President of SCEF, she said that, until Cliff firmly established his practice, “I had better keep my mouth shut.”⁶⁷⁶

The only organization in which Virginia remained active during the early 1950s was the United Church Women (UCW), which was attempting to integrate. The women began to hold integrated prayer groups, always at African-American churches. Through her participation in the UCW, Durr met both Coretta King and Juanita Abernathy. The UCW women faced considerable resistance and harassment. Eventually, a white supremacy newspaper published the names of all the women in the UCW. Both the women and their husbands began to receive threatening phone calls; according to

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 243.

⁶⁷⁴ Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, 5 March 1952, SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Virginia Durr to Aubrey Williams, 6 March 1952, SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946.

Virginia, some of the women's husbands took out newspaper ads, disassociating themselves from their wives' activities. The integrated group ended soon after.⁶⁷⁷

Although Virginia disassociated herself from many organizations, she remained as deeply concerned and interested in politics as when she lived in Washington. The election of Eisenhower, while disappointing, did not surprise Virginia. She feared that the Republicans would usher in a decade of fascism, and, although she disagreed with Stevenson's foreign policy, she joined a Stevenson club during the 1952 election.⁶⁷⁸

Although the Republicans seemed, to Virginia, little more than the "old Dixiecrats dressed up a little," she felt they did at least promise to end the war in Korea.⁶⁷⁹ The Korean War continued to trouble Virginia, and she felt a deep sense of guilt over U.S. actions there. She wrote to Corliss Lamont that the greatest impact the war had was on her children, and she despised the fear that war instills.⁶⁸⁰

During the 1950s, the poll tax battle still occupied Virginia's attention. Although she resigned from the SCEF, she continued to fight against the poll tax, proposing solutions to the daily problems she faced living in Alabama. To Clark Foreman, she suggested the creation of Voter Service Clubs, in which members paid a small amount to join. In return the club leaders would educate the members on how to pay poll taxes and register. It was a suggestion she had made various times to the SCHW and the PCA, with

⁶⁷⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 243-245.

⁶⁷⁸ Virginia Durr to Helen, 29 September 1952, MJ Papers, box 1, folder 15.1.38.

⁶⁷⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 26 February 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 19 November 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178.

⁶⁸⁰ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 7 February 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178; Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 19 November 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178. Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 28 March 1952.

little result.⁶⁸¹ She felt education and grass-roots mobilization were the keys to getting black voter participation. In 1952, Durr told the *Nation*,

So far this crusade to get out the vote is confined to the small, upper group of Negroes in the South; that is its weakness. The overwhelming mass of Southern Negroes simply do not have the time, the money, or the knowledge to become voters; but above all, they do not see the importance of voting.⁶⁸²

While the Voters Service Clubs, once again, failed to spark interest, Virginia also wrote to Lyndon Johnson, then Senate Majority Leader, citing the need for federal protection to assure voting rights. To Johnson, who supported a constitutional amendment abolishing the poll tax, Durr made concrete suggestions, such as making it a federal crime to prevent voting because of skin color.⁶⁸³ She told Johnson, “no noble ideas are worth a hoot unless you can back them up with some power and I see only three sources of power, money, force and votes. I prefer votes.”⁶⁸⁴ Although the League of Women Voters campaigned to end the poll tax in Alabama, they never invited Virginia to participate in the fight, about which Virginia concluded, “Goodness what a very dangerous woman I must be! Very flattering.”⁶⁸⁵

Returning to Alabama, the issue of racism became a daily struggle for the Durrs. According to Virginia, Cliff’s racial views had not altered as severely as hers. Virginia’s work in the SCHW and NCAPT caused her to face racism and segregation on a personal

⁶⁸¹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 26 February 1953.

⁶⁸² Virginia Durr, as quoted in Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 130.

⁶⁸³ Virginia Durr to Lyndon Johnson, 23 July 1959, LBJ Papers, box 17.

⁶⁸⁴ Virginia Durr to Lyndon Johnson, April 1959, LBJ Papers, box 17; Virginia also continued to avidly read the *Congressional Record*, asking Johnson to send her copies as soon as they came out. (see Virginia Durr to Lyndon Johnson, 13 August 1959, LBJ Papers, box 17.)

⁶⁸⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 14 April 1953.

level. Cliff's work in the RFC and the FCC never exposed him to the same discrimination that Virginia witnessed.⁶⁸⁶ Yet, Virginia felt a subtle change among African Americans in Montgomery. She claimed they were more desperate, but also hopeful and unwilling to be defeated again. While the whites in Montgomery did not fully accept Cliff and Virginia, neither did the black community. Early civil rights meetings at places like Tuskegee did not include the Durrs, or Aubrey Williams, on their invitation list.⁶⁸⁷

Yet, Cliff had established a reputation in his law practice for defending African Americans; consequently, E.D. Nixon sent him a number of cases. What appalled Cliff about many of the cases he received was that, all too often, they were situations in which whites took advantage of African Americans. Virginia claimed that "Cliff was brought up to believe that a Southern gentleman never took advantage of a black man. . . .to cheat a black man or to take advantage of his ignorance was common."⁶⁸⁸ Despite Cliff's reputation for offering a sound defense to African-American clients, many of the middle-class blacks sought the aid of white attorneys who, through personal relationships with the jury, would be able to win their case.⁶⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Virginia felt that African Americans in Montgomery, "would much prefer for us to stay here than to try and 'liberate' them from some far off place."⁶⁹⁰

Virginia continued to follow the ailing progressive movement primarily through her correspondence with Corliss Lamont, founder of the National Emergency Civil

⁶⁸⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 251-252.

⁶⁸⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], n.d.; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 15 February 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 14 April 1953.

⁶⁸⁸ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 251.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 250-251.

⁶⁹⁰ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 11 December 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178.

Liberties Union. In 1952, Lamont unsuccessfully ran for Senate as a candidate for the American Labor Party.⁶⁹¹ Frustrated with the divisions within the liberal movement, she told Clark Foreman, “it looks like we will slide down the abyss like the Gadarene swine into Fascism and War with all the Liberals disputing what kind of steps should have been built, or fences to keep us from sliding.”⁶⁹² McCarthyism was taking its toll on liberals, and Virginia supported Lamont when McCarthy called Corliss to testify in 1953.⁶⁹³ The anti-Communist hysteria infuriated Virginia, and she expressed her frustration in a letter to Clark Foreman: “I am getting either punch drunk or more philosophical, any rate I am not going to let the God Damned Bastards kill me with worry, and I hope to live to see the day they burn in Hell.”⁶⁹⁴

Closer to home, anti-Communist accusations affected Virginia’s children. Ann Lyon, the Durrs’ oldest daughter, traveled with her husband Walter to Thailand where he took a job working on a sanitary engineering job sponsored by the Foreign Health Service. In 1953, the government recalled the Lyons to the United States for ‘security’ reasons. Virginia learned that Ann, while in college, had a friendship with a suspected Communist, and that Ann signed a statement in opposition to the Smith Act trials. Walter Lyon was not under scrutiny, but Ann’s college activities made them a security risk. Virginia worried about her children and felt that it was “so ironic for them to get caught up in everything we have fought against.”⁶⁹⁵ Virginia hoped that Walt would

⁶⁹¹ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 29 May 1952, MJ Papers, box 1, folder 15.1.38; Corliss Lamont to Virginia Durr, 5 December 1952, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178.

⁶⁹² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 9 June 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁹³ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 28 September 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 178; see also Philip Whittenberg, ed., *The Lamont Case: History of a Congressional Investigation, Corliss Lamont and the McCarthy Hearings* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957).

⁶⁹⁴ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 13 November 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

support Ann, the way Cliff did her, but also felt the entire incident was a ruse to try and implicate Hugo Black.⁶⁹⁶

It was not a little ironic that after Virginia had disassociated herself with the SCEF that the anti-communist hysteria attacked her for her involvement in the organization. In 1954, the Red Scare, led by Joe McCarthy in Washington, moved South. McCarthy did not directly begin the focus of anti-communist attacks on the Southern states. A native Southerner, Senator Jim Eastland of Mississippi, led the investigation into 'subversive' Southern organizations.

In 1951 the Senate created its own version of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS). The SISS was intended to rival HUAC in its investigation on Communist activities in the United States. Senators Pat McCarran and William Jenner chaired the SISS during the 1950s. James Eastland, elected to the Senate in 1942, was a wealthy Mississippi planter, both a political opportunist and a true believer in Communist conspiracies.⁶⁹⁷ He was born wealthy, but raised among "rednecks." Once called an "illiterate in good-standing," Eastland had earned a reputation for making openly racist remarks in defense of segregation.⁶⁹⁸ A follower of McCarthy, Eastland soon earned the derogatory title "Mississippi McCarthy," and he consistently linked black civil rights with Communist agitation. Eastland hoped to capitalize on the headlines made by McCarthy with his own in-depth investigation in the

⁶⁹⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 2 December 1953, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 124; Virginia Durr to Hugo Black, 6 November 1953, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 7; Hugo Black to "Jinksie", 10 November 1953, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 7; Virginia Durr to the Foreman family, 23 December 1953.

⁶⁹⁷ Cate, *Great Fear*, 104; Woods, *Black Struggle*, 8.

⁶⁹⁸ Robert Sherrill, *Gothic Politics in the Deep South: Stars of the Confederacy* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968), 187, 204.

South. Eastland, not coincidentally, was also running for re-election in 1954, and facing a formidable opponent.⁶⁹⁹

Unique within the Southern Red Scare was the interlinking of Communism with civil rights. While Red Scares were not new to American politics, by the 1950s, anti-communist criers had another element to add to their agenda. It took little imagination for reactionaries and segregationists to argue that the supporters of racial equality and Communist were “two inseparable sides of a single coin.”⁷⁰⁰ Congress and the Executive had laid the groundwork for the Southern Red Scare during the 1940s and 1950s with the institution of loyalty oaths, public hearings, and ultimately, the establishment of the SISS.⁷⁰¹ According to historian Jeff Woods, Southern congressmen protected the existing racial conditions “by playing on the traditional southern fear of black rebellion,” which allowed conservative whites to “wrap their region’s racial agenda in the American flag and tie Southern security to national security.”⁷⁰² James Eastland, who at one time argued that the way to ensure an all-white electorate was to prohibit anyone engaged in “adultery,” “bigamy,” or “unlawful cohabitation,” from voting, was at the forefront of the crusade.⁷⁰³ As one witness brought before the SISS testified, James Eastland “saw a Red behind every black.”⁷⁰⁴

⁶⁹⁹ Glen, *Highlander*, 175; Sherrill, *Gothic Politics*, 187.

⁷⁰⁰ Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day*, 10.

⁷⁰¹ Woods, *Black Struggle*, 6.

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁰³ James Eastland, quoted in Sherrill, *Gothic Politics*, 211.

⁷⁰⁴ Woods, *Black Struggle*, 43. Virginia recalled an early encounter with Eastland in Washington, D.C., when she took a group of Southern women to talk to Eastland about repealing the poll tax. Many of the women were from Mississippi, and they were affiliated with the Women’s Society for Christian Service of the Methodist Church. Durr recalled that Eastland’s response was to tell the women that they wanted nothing more than to have sexual relations with black men, and that was their driving motivation for repealing the poll tax. Robert Sherrill argues that Eastland was obsessed with African-American sexuality, particularly interracial sex. During his university days, according to Virginia Durr, it was well-known that Eastland “like dark meat the best.” (Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 171-172; Sherrill, *Gothic Politics*, 205-206; Virginia Durr to Lyndon Johnson, 22 August 1959, LBJ Papers, Selected Names, box 17).

The focus of Eastland's investigation in the South was the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), the remnant of the defunct SCHW. Engaged in civil rights activity since 1948, particularly in its denouncement of segregation and discrimination, the SCEF became a prime target for attack by the early 1950s. During the late 1940s, the SCEF focused much of its attention on the injustice of segregation in public schools. The Conference drew upon the legacy of the SCHW; most of its board members had strong ties to the SCHW, including James Dombrowski, Clark Foreman, and Virginia Durr.⁷⁰⁵ For its attack on segregation, the SCEF became a visible target in 1954. The Eastland probe came only two months before the Supreme Court's monumental ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which ultimately desegregated public schools. James Eastland's timing was not coincidental.

Eastland did not take the defendants in the SISS investigation by surprise, however. In 1949, Paul Crouch, an ex-Communist informer, testified before HUAC about the nature and origins of the SCHW. Crouch's testimony painted the SCHW as a Communist-led organization, whose purpose was to spread the Communist agenda in the South. Crouch named James Dombrowski, Clark Foreman, and Virginia Durr as Communist sympathizers, who knew that the SCHW and its publication, the *Southern Patriot*, were tools of the Communist Party. While Crouch maintained that Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt were blind to the Communist domination of the SCHW, he argued that the Progressive Party, which SCHW supported in 1948, was yet another front for the CP.

⁷⁰⁵ Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 140-141, 146-149.

Myles Horton also knew that, by 1953, the House of Representatives labeled Highlander Folk School a Communist-front organization.⁷⁰⁶

On the basis of Crouch's testimony, and the SCWH's reputation of alleged 'Communist infiltration,' it was no shock when the SISS issued subpoenas for members of the SCEF. Aubrey Williams, president of the SCEF, and the first to receive a subpoena, expected the Red Scare to move South with the SCEF as its focus. Virginia also knew of Crouch's testimony and that he implicated her as a Communist-sympathizer, and she felt for some time that HUAC was trying to implicate Hugo Black. Yet, she was more astonished by the subpoena than Williams.⁷⁰⁷ She had, by 1954, resigned from the board of the SCEF; furthermore, she felt that she and Cliff were not "big enough targets and have been *hors de combat* too long."⁷⁰⁸

Initially, Cliff wanted to go to New Orleans to represent Williams. Cliff's doctor, however, opposed the idea because of Cliff's heart problem that he developed after his back surgeries. Virginia feared that if Cliff got back into the fight it would kill him. Yet, when Virginia received a subpoena a few days later, Cliff felt there was no choice. Cliff did not go as Virginia's attorney. Instead, a local lawyer, and friend of Cliff's, named John Kohn offered his services to Virginia pro bono. Dombrowski openly told the press that the real goal of the investigation was to slander the SCEF's attempts to battle segregation. In particular, both Dombrowski, as well as the many African Americans on the SCEF Board, found it insulting that Eastland subpoenaed no African Americans; the

⁷⁰⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee of the Committee on Un-American Activities, *Testimony of Paul Crouch*, 81st Congress, 1st sess., 1949, 189-193, 197-198; Representative Pat Sutton to Myles Horton, 1 December 1953, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 5.

⁷⁰⁷ John A. Salmond, " 'The Great Southern Commie Hunt': Aubrey Williams, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, and the Internal Security Subcommittee," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 77 (Autumn, 1978): 433; Virginia Durr to Clark, Mairi, Joanie, Shelagh, and Geno, 23 December 1953; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 2 December 1953.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

purpose, according to Myles Horton, was to divide liberal whites and the black community. In total, Eastland subpoenaed six witnesses: Aubrey Williams, Virginia Durr, James Dombrowski, Myles Horton from Highlander, Leo Sheiner, from Miami, Florida, and Max Shlafrock, also from Miami.⁷⁰⁹

Eastland's choice of witnesses had many motivations. The hearings were, in general, an attempt to discredit white Southern liberals. According to John Salmond, "SCEF was just an excuse, not the prime target."⁷¹⁰ Through the relationship with Myles Horton and the SCEF, Eastland could make a connection to the Highlander Folk School, which had subsequently initiated training workshops in civil rights activism. By tainting Virginia Durr, he could make the connection to Hugo Black, thus implicating a Supreme Court Justice on the verge of handing down a major case in favor of civil rights.⁷¹¹

According to the transcript of the hearings, Virginia Durr had not only "accepted Communist Party discipline," but had also, according to an unnamed witness,

plotted with the Communist leaders to exploit her relationship as sister-in-law of a Justice of the Supreme Court in the interests of the world Communist conspiracy and interests of overthrowing our Government.⁷¹²

Eastland learned, from McCarthy, the political gains of attacking the Supreme Court, even if it had to be done through the back door.⁷¹³

⁷⁰⁹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 254-255; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 158; Virginia Durr, interview with Gillette, 40; Clifford J. Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 9; Virginia Foster Durr, subpoena to appear before the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security of the Committee on the Judiciary, 5 March 1954, VFD Papers, box 4, folder 6; *The Times-Picayune* [New Orleans], 16 March 1954, 4; *Ibid.*, 17 March 1954; Dorothy M. Zellner, "Red Roadshow: Eastland in New Orleans, 1954," *Louisiana History* 33 (Winter 1992): 37. Professor Alva Taylor was also subpoenaed, but could not attend because of poor health.

⁷¹⁰ Salmond, "Commie Hunt," 452.

⁷¹¹ Glen, *Highlander*, 173, 175-176.

⁷¹² U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee of the Judiciary: Subversive Influence in the Southern Conference Educational Fund, Inc.*, 83rd Congress, 2d sess., (Washington, D.C., 1955), vii. Hereafter cited as SCEF, *Hearings*.

When local newspapers got word of the coming investigation, the *Alabama Journal* came to Virginia Durr's defense. Stressing Virginia's attractiveness and respectable upbringing, the editorial questioned how she could be involved in an investigation with such "unorthodox" thinkers as Aubrey Williams.⁷¹⁴ The article's writer intimated that, as proper Southern ladies, both Virginia Durr and Josephine Black faced condemnation because of their husbands' political beliefs. While the writer admired the women's loyalty to their husbands, the editor also concluded that it was impossible that such "beautiful Alabama girls" could be involved in any unpatriotic activities.⁷¹⁵ Although Virginia appreciated the kindly article, she informed the editor that her ideas and principles were "entirely" her own and neither her husband, nor any member of her family, held any responsibility for them; furthermore, she wrote, "I, too, am an unorthodox thinker, and I abhor political conformity, in any party"⁷¹⁶ What Virginia felt most troubled the editor, as well as most of white Alabama, was her views on race. She recounted her incident at Wellesley, her relationship with Mary McLeod Bethune and Mary Church Terrell, and how "by a long process of trial and error," she decided that she had a "responsibility" to help African Americans achieve equality.⁷¹⁷ She concluded her letter to the editor by stating plainly, "I love and honor the white women of the south, and I have come to honor (for I already loved them) the Negro women of the south."⁷¹⁸ It was a bold statement for Durr, who chose not to hide behind

⁷¹³ Sherrill, *Gothic Politics*, 205.

⁷¹⁴ "Two Beautiful Alabama Girls," *Alabama Journal*, 10 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁶ Virginia Foster Durr, letter to the editor, *Alabama Journal*, March 1954, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8. See also Virginia Durr to C.M. Stanley, 10 March 1954, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 5.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*

her husband's political beliefs and take a public stand against racism.⁷¹⁹ Virginia's "responsibility" for helping African Americans demonstrated, yet again, her inability to overcome her feeling of *noblesse oblige*. It was a feeling that would later characterize her activities during the early civil rights struggle in Montgomery.

Virginia's classism, however, reached its height when it came to James Eastland. Years later, Virginia expressed her feelings about James Eastland: "The idea of Jim Eastland, just a common as pig tracks. . .calling me to account—it made me so angry my adrenalin began to rise. I wasn't scared. I was just mad as hops."⁷²⁰ Virginia considered Eastland a Mississippi "redneck hill-billy."⁷²¹ Durr, the product of an 'aristocratic' Southern family, felt indignant that a person of Eastland's class would dare confront her.

While the Eastland trial demonstrates the interlinking of civil rights and Communist hysteria in the United States, it also reveals how anti-communism and traditional roles for women were mutually reinforcing. In her study of the Ohio Un-American Activities Commission, Kate Weigand argues that anti-Communists sought to restrain politically active women who did not conform to the 1950s ideal of homemaker and wife.⁷²² While Weigand focuses much of her study on women within the Communist Party, her argument can extend to women who engaged in popular front activities of the 1930s and 1940s. Weigand argues that it mattered little if a woman was a member of the Communist Party, for the CP "was the center of a large progressive movement that

⁷¹⁹ Clifford Durr also wrote a letter to the editor, stating that, after twenty-eight years of marriage, he had developed a great respect for his wife. In particular, he admired her "unwillingness to abandon her friends or her beliefs under pressure." (Clifford Durr, "Word from Clifford Durr," *Alabama Journal*, March 1954, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8).

⁷²⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 256.

⁷²¹ Virginia Durr, quoted in Zellner, "Red Roadshow," 48.

⁷²² Kate Weigand, "The Red Menace, the Feminine Mystique, and the Ohio Un-American Activities Commission: Gender and Anti-Communism in Ohio, 1951-1954," *The Journal of Women's History* 3 (Winter, 1992): 70-94.

encompassed many organizations and profoundly influenced thousands of men and women.”⁷²³ While Virginia never considered joining the Communist Party, she did believe that Socialism was preferable to the United States’ economic system. She wrote to Curtis MacDougall, who wrote a history on the Progressive Party, “I want Socialism but I want a free conscience too. I want to be able to say what I please, and think what I please, and write what I please.”⁷²⁴ Virginia Durr remained politically active during a time when women were encouraged to keep out of politics and public life. Certainly, they were not encouraged to work for social change, particularly in the politically-charged areas of segregation and discrimination. Durr, although not particularly active at the time of the Eastland hearings, was being punished for transgressing against the female ‘norm.’

It is interesting that Eastland chose to investigate Virginia instead of Clifford. Cliff had a prominent political identity, having worked within the national government, and had an equally close relationship to Hugo Black as Virginia. Although Cliff supported Virginia’s activities, he was not involved in the SCHW and the NCAPT. Yet, the inference could easily be made that Cliff could still influence the political ideas of both Hugo Black and the Roosevelts, and from a much more prominent position. Yet, Virginia was easier to attack than her husband. As a woman, Virginia transgressed against the Southern norm that discouraged white women from engaging in controversial issues, such as segregation. Women, regarded as the ‘weaker’ sex, were more susceptible to Communist influence and, therefore, easier victims.⁷²⁵ Yet, simultaneously, Virginia

⁷²³ Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 9.

⁷²⁴ Virginia Durr to Curtis MacDougall, 17 August 1953, reprinted in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 57.

⁷²⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 96.

Durr realized that her position as a woman allowed for more leverage in dealing with men like James Eastland.

After receiving the subpoena, Virginia immediately began calling Washington, contacting some of her old friends. She called Lyndon Johnson, then Senate Majority Leader. Virginia felt that Lyndon agreed to do what he could for her because they were “good” people—“this was getting down to the character, not the ideology.”⁷²⁶ Although Johnson could not prevent the investigation, and he was responsible for appointing James Eastland to the Judiciary Committee, he did manage to keep other Democrats from going to New Orleans. Republican George Bender, who had fought against the poll tax with Virginia, also helped by discouraging Republicans from attending the hearings.⁷²⁷ According to Cliff, Virginia “maneuvered around. . . .she sometimes works on a lower level in her moves that I do. While I always work on principal, she works to survive.”⁷²⁸ Aubrey Williams also tried to get the SCEF investigation stopped, but was almost pleased to be called in order to state his views publicly and demonstrate how the hearings thwarted liberty. Due to the influence of Johnson and Bender, Eastland, who “rode into town like a sheriff’s posse,” arrived in New Orleans alone, accompanied only by the SISS lawyer, Richard Arens.⁷²⁹

The hearings began on March 18 in the Post Office building in New Orleans, Louisiana. Even before Eastland called Durr to the stand, she and her attorney, John Kohn, developed their strategy. Virginia decided not to take refuge behind the Fifth

⁷²⁶ Virginia Durr, interview with Gillette, 42.

⁷²⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 256-257; Sherrill, *Gothic Politics*, 193; Salmond, “Commie Hunt,” 436-437. Virginia claims she actually threatened Bender with bringing his name into the investigation, by telling Eastland how the NCAPT used his office and office equipment for their work. After that, he agreed to do what he could to help. (Virginia Durr, interview with Gillette, 44).

⁷²⁸ Clifford J. Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 9.

⁷²⁹ Cate, *Great Fear*, 94.

Amendment. A common defense for those called before investigating committees on charges of subversion, more than five hundred witnesses invoked the Fifth Amendment from 1950 to 1956. Although it protected the witness from self-implication, the results were often ruinous. To many anti-communist investigators, pleading the “fifth” implied guilt. Many who invoked the fifth during their hearings often lost their jobs or faced social and/or professional ostracism. Leo Sheiner, one of the witnesses in the SCEF probe, had his law license revoked by the state of Florida after pleading the fifth in the Eastland hearing.⁷³⁰ The press, therefore, predicted that “sparks” would fly when Durr testified, as she informed reporters that the investigation was nothing more than “an inquisition designed to feed Senator Eastland’s headline hopper.”⁷³¹ She continued, “I am not going to let the headline-happy Senator Eastland use me as a brush by which he can tar and feather other people.”⁷³² Virginia’s daughter, Ann, tried to convince her parents not to take the hearings personally. Ann expressed concern about Virginia and wrote Cliff, advising, “I too think Mother can manage herself if only she be calm and not feel that she is being persecuted.”⁷³³

On the opening day of the hearings, after a testimony about the Communist-domination of the SCEF from members of the Young Men’s Business Club of New Orleans, Eastland called Leo Sheiner and then Max Shlafrock. Both men resided in Miami, Florida, and had connections to the SCEF, according to Eastland. Sheiner, a Miami attorney, refused to answer Eastland’s questions in regards to his association with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Citing the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth,

⁷³⁰ “Williams, Mrs. Durr Plan ‘No 5th Amendment Screen’,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 18 March 1954, 1; “Caute, *Great Fear*, 150; Fried, *Nightmare in Red*, 172-173; SCEF, *Hearings*, “Appendix,” 163-168.

⁷³¹ “No. 5th Amendment,” 1.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, 2A.

⁷³³ Ann and Walter Lyon to ‘Daddy,’ 13 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6.

Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth amendments of the Constitution, Sheiner argued that the committee had no grounds for the investigation, and that the subpoena was vague as to the nature of the hearings. Although Sheiner did respond that he was not currently a member of the Communist Party, he refused to answer all other questions. During Sheiner's testimony, John Kohn, Durr's counsel, asked if cross-examination were allowed. Eastland replied that it was not, and that, as far as the rules of the investigation went, he would decide the rules along the way and announce them when he saw appropriate.⁷³⁴

After Sheiner's testimony, Eastland called Paul Crouch to the stand. Crouch and John Butler were the primary government witnesses at the SCEF probe. Crouch, employed by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, was an ex-Communist who had spent the early 1950s traveling throughout the United States and testifying at numerous security hearings, including that of J. Robert Oppenheimer. Claiming that he left the Communist Party in 1942 because of disillusionment, he became a paid government informant, implicating others he charged with Communist subversion. His status as an "ex-Communist" gave him credence among the Justice Department, as the government regarded him as an 'expert' on United States Communism. Crouch's memo, "Communist Infiltration in the American Armed Forces" helped prompt the Army-McCarthy hearings. Upon arriving in New Orleans, Crouch told reporters that he knew of at least one hundred Communists in Louisiana, most of them residing in New

⁷³⁴ SCEF, *Hearings*, 1-11. In particular, Sheiner refused to answer whether or not he had been a Communist in the past. "Stormy SCEF Hearing Opens at New Orleans," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 19 March 1954, 1; For an informative, day-by-day examination of the hearings, see Zellner, "Red Roadshow."

Orleans.⁷³⁵ Crouch, also an ex-convict who once did time at Alcatraz, “must rank as one of the most brazen and colorful liars in the business.”⁷³⁶ For Eastland’s purpose, Crouch, described as having “an ever-present smirk” on his face, ranked as Eastland’s star witness.⁷³⁷

Crouch’s testimony against Sheiner painted him as a self-proclaimed Communist, who had worked with Representative Lee Geyer. According to Crouch, Sheiner was the leader of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Florida. As he had in 1949, Crouch once again laid out the Communist formation of the SCHW, particularly the role of Joseph Gelders in both the SCHW’s conception and establishment. According to Crouch, the Communist Party charged Gelders to infiltrate the White House, duping Mrs. Roosevelt and the President into supporting the SCHW. When Sheiner returned to the stand, he once again refused to answer Eastland’s questions directly.⁷³⁸ Eastland, furious at Sheiner’s evasions, called him a “disgrace to the United States” and a Communist. Although he asked to stay, federal marshals physically escorted Sheiner from the room.⁷³⁹

After a brief testimony from Max Shlafrock, a contractor from Miami, who, like Sheiner, refused to answer about his connection to the SCHW on the basis of the Fifth Amendment, Eastland called James Dombrowski.⁷⁴⁰ The *Montgomery Advertiser* reported that, compared to Eastland’s treatment of Sheiner and Shlafrock, Dombrowski

⁷³⁵ SCEF, *Hearings*, 11-12 ; Salmond, “Commie Hunt,” 439; *The Times-Picayune*, 15 March 1954, 1; Willard Shelton, “Paul Crouch, Informer,” *The New Republic*, 19 July 1954, 7-9.

⁷³⁶ Cate, *Great Fear*, 126.

⁷³⁷ *The Montgomery Advertiser*, 19 March 1954, 3A.

⁷³⁸ SCEF, *Hearings*, 11-22.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23; “Never Reds, Williams, Durrs Tell Eastland,” *The Times-Picayune*, 20 March 1954, 3.

⁷⁴⁰ SCEF, *Hearings*, 23-30.

was “handled gently.”⁷⁴¹ Unlike the previous witnesses, Dombrowski willingly answered Eastland’s questions. Yet, he refused to answer one—the names of the contributors to the SCEF. Dombrowski produced the financial records and the list of Board of Directors for the committee, but argued that the subpoena said nothing of a list of financial contributors. Benjamin Smith, Dombrowski’s attorney, attempted to get a list of objections entered into the record, which Eastland overruled. Eastland did allow Dombrowski to read his statement, which argued that the committee violated the First Amendment and, for that reason, he would not produce the list Eastland so desired. Dombrowski made it clear that he was not invoking the Fifth Amendment, but refused to answer the question as to who contributed money to the SCEF.⁷⁴² With a “very emphatic no,” Dombrowski answered that he was not a member of the Communist Party.⁷⁴³ With that testimony, Eastland called John Butler, of Dallas, Texas, and Paul Crouch.

Butler, also an ex-Communist, claimed membership in the CPUSA from 1941 to 1942. Recruited in Bessemer, Alabama, Butler claimed to have joined the Communist Party through his membership in a local union. Butler, described by Jennings Perry as “an earthworm of a man for whom it is possible to have compassion,” testified to meeting James Dombrowski at a Communist meeting in 1942.⁷⁴⁴ The meeting, which took place in Dombrowski’s hotel room in Birmingham, was between Dombrowski and Alton Lawrence, and they “talked over the party line.”⁷⁴⁵ According to Butler, Dombrowski

⁷⁴¹ “Stormy SCEF Hearing,” 3A.

⁷⁴² SCEF, *Hearings*, 30-42. At one point, while Arens questioned Dombrowski about the SCEF Board, Dombrowski had to inform Arens that “Mr” Modjeska M. Simkins, who sat on the Board, was in fact a woman, not a man.

⁷⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁴⁴ Jennings Perry, “The Congressional Inquisition Moves South,” *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*, 29 March 1954, 2; SCEF, *Hearings*, 44-45.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

was “upper 10” in the Communist Party, a “big boy.”⁷⁴⁶ At that point, Smith requested the right to cross-examine Butler, which Eastland refused.

Next, Paul Crouch began his testimony against Dombrowski. Crouch claimed to have first met Dombrowski at SCHW meetings and at Highlander, which Crouch described as “an independent labor school,” that was actually “working in close cooperation with the Communist Party.”⁷⁴⁷ Crouch testified that the CPUSA chose Dombrowski, along with Joseph Gelders, to infiltrate the White House through the SCHW. Crouch claimed he met Dombrowski on various occasions, and on one occasion heard him singing the Internationale, the song of the World Communist movement.⁷⁴⁸

When Dombrowski resumed the stand, he informed Eastland that he did not know Butler and knew Crouch only slightly. Dombrowski asserted, with some humor, that he had never sung the Internationale in Crouch’s presence or in anyone else’s. Arens then asked Dombrowski about a petition that he signed, which called for amnesty for the defendants of the Smith Act trials. Dombrowski concurred that he had probably signed such a petition in the defense of civil rights.⁷⁴⁹ He defended his position by stating that three principles have guided his actions, “that is a faith in democracy, in brotherhood, and a feeling that our civil rights must be kept inviolate to all people.”⁷⁵⁰ After more than two hours on the stand, Dombrowski’s frustration grew, as Eastland often refused to allow him to finish answering questions. Eastland probed into almost every organization in which Dombrowski was involved.⁷⁵¹ When asked if Dombrowski wanted the

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., 48-49; At this point, Dombrowski interjected, asking if Crouch was calling him a Communist, to which Eastland replied, “you may draw your own conclusions.” (SCEF, *Hearings*, 49).

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., 54-56.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., 59-78.

“Communist conspiracy” in the United States uncovered, Dombrowski replied, “as a taxpayer I feel we could spend our money to better advantage.”⁷⁵² Yet, Dombrowski did give Eastland the primary goal of the SCEF—to improve race relations and end segregation.⁷⁵³ At the close of the day, Eastland gave Dombrowski until the following morning to produce the list of contributors. Disgusted by the spectacle of the investigation, the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported that, after the first day of testimony, Eastland failed to label successfully the SCEF as a Communist organization.⁷⁵⁴ While the testimonies took place, the reporter noted that “all day today, reporters at the press table could listen to the Eastland hearings and see out the window where an American Flag fluttered gently.”⁷⁵⁵

Cliff recalled that, after the first day of testimony, he found Virginia pounding away on a typewriter in their hotel room in the middle of the night. When he asked Virginia what she was doing, she replied that she was writing her statement. Cliff had already told her that, although she may go to jail, she should answer Eastland’s questions about herself, but not give any names. She replied that, after what she witnessed the first day of the hearings, she was not going to answer any questions or have anything at all to do with the committee. With that, she made her decision to stand in contempt of the SISS.⁷⁵⁶

When the hearings resumed the next morning, Eastland again called Dombrowski to the stand. Dombrowski, once again, refused to hand over the list, thereby

⁷⁵² Ibid., 79.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁵⁴ “Stormy SCEF Hearing,” 3A.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁶ Clifford J. Durr, transcript of oral interview with unidentified interviewer, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 50, p. 295-296.

facing possible contempt charges. Dombrowski then requested to read a statement about the activities of the SCEF.⁷⁵⁷ After almost five hours on the stand, Dombrowski felt entitled to make an “observation,” to which Eastland replied, “I am not interested in observations. You may stand aside.”⁷⁵⁸ A marshal then escorted Dombrowski from the stand. After Richard Arens read a brief quote by Georgi Dmitrov, a world leader of the Communist Party, Eastland then called Virginia Foster Durr to testify.⁷⁵⁹

Virginia Durr, accompanied by her lawyer, John Kohn, took the stand on Saturday morning. A local newspaper reported, “Mrs. Durr, an attractive woman of about 40 . . . had hardly taken her seat before the fireworks began.”⁷⁶⁰ To the first question, “kindly identify yourself,” Kohn told Virginia to sit down and remain silent. Kohn then began to enumerate the various objections that his client had to the proceedings.⁷⁶¹ While Kohn asserted that Durr was not taking the Fifth Amendment, she objected to testifying on the following grounds: that the subpoena’s language was vague and amounted to “a fishing expedition,” that the First Amendment protected Durr against testifying about her personal beliefs, and that the hearings were held without a quorum.⁷⁶² Kohn then requested that Durr be allowed to read her statement. Eastland overruled Kohn’s objections and then stated that he was “not going to permit any self-serving

⁷⁵⁷ SCEF, *Hearings*, 81-83; “Stormy SCEF Hearing,” 3A.

⁷⁵⁸ SCEF, *Hearings*, 83.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Dmitrov’s quote discussed the importance of followers, who are not Party members, but have considerable influence in society, such as writers, professors, or military officials. Those people, according to Dmitrov, were more important to the Communist cause than hundreds of official members. Arens’s implication was that those who further the Communist cause, although not officially Party members, are serving the Communist Party faithfully and successfully. (SCEF, *Hearings*, 83-84).

⁷⁶⁰ “Alabama Woman Declares,” 8.

⁷⁶¹ SCEF, *Hearings*, 84.

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, 84-85.

statement and then have the witness decline to answer my questions.”⁷⁶³ After much arguing, Eastland suppressed the statement, refusing it to be allowed into the record, and the questioning proceeded.

Durr’s testimony, or lack thereof, was a bold stand in the face of Communist accusations. Once again, Arens asked Durr to identify herself. After conferring with Kohn, she refused to answer. Arens proceeded, asking about the SCHW. Finally, Arens asked if Virginia was, or ever had been, a member of the Communist Party. To that, Virginia replied, quite loudly, “No.”⁷⁶⁴ She then agreed to answer that she was the wife of Clifford Durr. Beyond that, she said nothing else. To all other questions, she either refused to respond or answered, “I stand mute.”⁷⁶⁵ Although Kohn informed Arens that Durr would stand mute, Arens continued his questioning. The questions clarified the true reason why Eastland subpoenaed Durr. Arens asked if Durr introduced Joseph Gelders, named by Paul Crouch as a subversive for the Communist Party, to Hugo Black. It was clear that Eastland was attempting to make the connection between Gelders, the Roosevelts, and Hugo Black. Virginia Durr was named as the go-between. Eastland also cited Virginia in contempt of the committee.⁷⁶⁶ When Eastland told Durr she could temporarily stand aside, she flippantly replied, “I don’t care at all. I liked being here.”⁷⁶⁷

Eastland then called Paul Crouch to testify. Kohn requested, again, the right to cross-examine Crouch, which Eastland, again, denied. During the following testimonies,

⁷⁶³ Ibid., 86; “Mrs. Durr Called Supporter of Reds in Higher Echelons,” *Alabama Journal*, 19 March 1954, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 4.

⁷⁶⁴ SCEF, *Hearings*, 86; “Alabama Woman Declares She’s No Commie,” *New Orleans States*, 19 March 1954, 1.

⁷⁶⁵ SCEF, *Hearings*, 87-90.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 89-90; “Never Red—Mrs Durr; Mum to Other Questions,” *Times-Picayune*, 20 March 1954, 4; “Hugo Black’s In-Law and Reds Linked,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 March 1954, 4.

⁷⁶⁷ SCEF, *Hearings*, 91; “Woman Denies Being Red, But Won’t Say More,” *New Orleans States*, 19 March 1954, 1, 7.

and during much of the day, Virginia pulled her compact out of her purse and powdered her nose.⁷⁶⁸ According to Cliff, her actions, “drove them into a rage.”⁷⁶⁹ Crouch claimed that, when he took over as editor of the ‘communist paper’ the *New South*, Virginia Durr of Seminary Hill was one of the subscribers. Crouch also claimed that frequent reference was made to Durr at Communist Party meetings. Her home in Seminary Hill, by Crouch’s account, was a meeting place for top Soviet spies and Communist Party leaders. Although he claimed that he did not believe Durr to be a Communist, or ever had been, she acted under Communist Party discipline.⁷⁷⁰ More importantly, she used her position as sister-in-law to Hugo Black to promote “the interests of the World Communist conspiracy and interest of overthrowing our Government.”⁷⁷¹ Working with Joseph Gelders, Durr attempted to mask the true purpose of the SCHW by obtaining the support of Mrs. Roosevelt and Hugo Black.⁷⁷² Eastland and Arens did not take the question to the final step—asking if Hugo Black was aware of the Communist leadership of the SCHW and that his sister-in-law was under Communist leadership. It seems that even James Eastland would not go that far.

The FBI undoubtedly supplied much of Crouch’s testimony against Virginia. The FBI continued to investigate the Durrs, handing the Mobile, Alabama branch their case when the Durrs moved from Denver to Montgomery. The FBI cataloged Virginia’s involvement in “Communist-front” activities and her associations with “persons of Communist sympathy.”⁷⁷³ Included in the files of the early 1950s was a testimony from

⁷⁶⁸ “Four Montgomerians in Hearing Spotlight,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 20 March 1954, 1; “The South: Red Hot,” *Newsweek*, 29 March 1954, 26.

⁷⁶⁹ Clifford J. Durr, interview, p. 296.

⁷⁷⁰ SCEF, *Hearings*, 90-93.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁷³ “Virginia Foster Durr,” 16 December 1952, VFD FBI files, 1-4.

Mrs. Elizabeth Wilson, formally associated with the SCHW, in which Wilson testified that, out of the numerous members of SCHW, Wilson suspected only Virginia Durr of pro-Communist sympathies. An unnamed informant also testified that Virginia Durr agreed to join the Communist Party at the urging of Joe Gelders sometime around 1938. Much of Crouch's testimony reflected the FBI reports that had been made about Virginia Durr since the 1940s, prompting the Bureau to suspect Crouch had been furnished his information. At the close of the Eastland hearings, even the FBI questioned the validity of Crouch's testimony and suggested the Bureau interview him.⁷⁷⁴ Immediately after the hearings, the FBI did interview Crouch and concluded that his statement, "is not satisfactory in as much as he deals with generalities and is not offering any specific facts."⁷⁷⁵ While the FBI doubted Crouch's statement, the Bureau continued their investigation of both Cliff and Virginia after the SISS hearings.

Along with Paul Crouch, John Butler testified against Virginia. He claimed to have met Virginia at the home of Alton Lawrence, who had been active in the SCHW in Alabama. Butler claimed Lawrence was a Communist, one of the major leaders of the CP in Alabama. At one labor union meeting in Birmingham, Butler testified that Virginia Durr gave a speech, although she did not represent any organization.⁷⁷⁶ Butler also claimed to have had dinner with both Durrs and Lawrence in Washington, D.C., during which Virginia and Lawrence, "talked along the party line," and mentioned Earl Browder, one-time head of the CPUSA, frequently.⁷⁷⁷ Before being dismissed, Butler

⁷⁷⁴ "Virginia Heard Foster Durr," 1 March 1954, VFD FBI file, 1-6; "Virginia Foster Durr, nee Virginia Foster, aka. Mrs. Clifford Judkins Durr," 7 October 1954, VFD FBI files, 3; "Espionage in the House, 1934-1942," 25 March 1954, VFD FBI files.

⁷⁷⁵ A. H. Belmont to L.V. Boardman, "Memorandum," 1 April 1954, VFD FBI files, 2.

⁷⁷⁶ SCEF, *Hearings*, 98.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

wanted to add that the previous day he had a conversation with Virginia Durr, during which she threatened him, telling him, “Don’t ever talk to me you bastard. You better not ever go back to Bessemer, Alabama, and if you do, they are going to get you.”⁷⁷⁸

With that anecdote, Butler left the stand.

Aubrey Williams took the stand next. Eastland released Sheiner, Shlafrock and Dombrowski from their subpoenas, but not Virginia. Like Dombrowski, Williams compliantly answered Eastland and Arens’s questions, except when he was asked about other people’s political or personal beliefs. Williams testified about the Highlander Folk School, the SCEF, and the Progressive Citizens of America (which confused Williams, as he did not know that was the full name of the Progressive Party). While Dombrowski testified that he joined many organizations, regardless of Communist members, Williams claimed that on occasions, he disassociated himself from groups, such as the Civil Rights Congress, because of Communist-domination. Once again, John Butler testified to having met Williams with Alton Lawrence. According to Butler, Lawrence introduced Williams as a fellow “comrade,” and that he had seen Williams at Communist Party meetings. Outraged, Williams challenged Butler to make his statement to reporters, so that Williams could sue him for libel. During Butler’s testimony, Clifford Durr requested a recess so that Williams and Butler could go outside and settle the matter.⁷⁷⁹ Eastland responded, “now listen, Mr. Durr, this is a hearing.”⁷⁸⁰

During Crouch’s testimony, Eastland surprised the witnesses by allowing Clifford Durr, acting as Williams’s attorney, to cross-examine Crouch. Clifford felt that Crouch was a “psychopath,” and that asking him a question was like “putting a dime in a juke-

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., 99-118.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid., 120.

box to play a record. You put in another dime, and you get another record.”⁷⁸¹ Jennings Perry described Durr’s examination of Crouch as “trying to catch an eel with buttered fingers.”⁷⁸² Cliff suspected that Crouch had been working with the FBI since the 1930s. Durr relentlessly tried to get Crouch to cite exact dates for his alleged activities, and forced Crouch to admit that, while in the U.S. Army, he had been court-martialed for plotting to overthrow the United States government. Durr pointed out that Crouch’s training in the Soviet Union included deception and that Crouch openly divulged information about the Communist Party to the FBI in 1947. Durr’s cross-examination threw considerable doubt on Crouch’s testimony, at least for those who might have believed it. In an even more brazen move, Crouch claimed that Clifford Durr had once been a Communist, and that he had seen Durr at numerous Communist meetings from 1938-1941. At this juncture, Durr asked to be put under oath to testify, and Eastland acquiesced.⁷⁸³

Clifford Durr’s testimony argued that Paul Crouch’s accusation that Durr was a Communist was a “complete and absolute falsehood.”⁷⁸⁴ Durr stated that he was not presently, nor ever had been, a member of the Communist Party. He told Eastland, “one or the other of us, I think, should be indicted for perjury.”⁷⁸⁵ Cliff argued that the National Lawyers’ Guild was not Communist-dominated, and he defended his friendship with Joseph Gelders. Eastland asked about Durr’s trip to Poland for the World Congress of Intellectuals of Peace and who accompanied him on the trip. Durr replied, “Mr.

⁷⁸¹ Clifford J. Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 17, folder 9.

⁷⁸² Perry, “Congressional Inquisition,” 3.

⁷⁸³ Clifford J. Durr, interview, p. 297; SCEF, *Hearings*, 120-144.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

Chairman, I am not going to feed names here.”⁷⁸⁶ After assuring Eastland that he paid Virginia Durr’s expenses to Poland, Clifford left the stand.

Virginia released her statement, suppressed by Eastland, to the press. In it, she challenged the validity of the SISS’s “kangaroo court” and Eastland’s authority to hold such a hearing.⁷⁸⁷ She argued that Eastland was predisposed to find the SCEF guilty of treason and that the testimonies of Crouch and Butler were unreliable and dubious. She stated that “I do not recognize the power of this committee to try me as a traitor.”⁷⁸⁸

Virginia claimed that she was not taking refuge behind the Fifth Amendment, but only demanded the right to a fair hearing, not to be “subjected to the indignities and the disgrace of this public lynching of my life and reputation. . . .my life and my work are an open book.”⁷⁸⁹ She concluded her statement by proclaiming, “I refuse to submit to the authority of this Committee and I stand in total and utter contempt of it.”⁷⁹⁰ One supportive reader of the *Washington Post* wrote that Durr’s words had “the ring of a Patrick Henry.”⁷⁹¹

The high drama of the Eastland hearings occurred the next day, starting with the testimony of Myles Horton, the last witness. Horton’s testimony was short-lived. Arens began by asking Horton questions about Highlander, which Horton openly answered. Yet, when Eastland questioned Horton about Dombrowski, Horton refused to answer and, instead, asked to make a statement. Pushing him to answer the question, Horton

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., 148.

⁷⁸⁷ “Suppressed Statement Made Public,” *Washington Post*, 23 March 1954, 20; “Statement of Virginia Foster Durr Before the Senate Internal Security Committee in New Orleans,” VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 179.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁹¹ Frances McConnell, “Defiant Statement,” *Washington Post*, March 1954, newspaper clipping, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6.

responded, “Mr. Chairman, you listened to Communists and ex-Communists talk here. . . .won’t you listen to an American citizen talk?”⁷⁹² Eastland ordered deputy marshals to drag Horton from the stand and eject him from the courtroom, while Horton shouted, “They’re treating me like a criminal!”⁷⁹³ After Horton’s removal, Crouch again took the stand.⁷⁹⁴

Crouch’s final testimony broke Clifford Durr’s patience. A man deeply committed to honesty, Durr had endured three days of falsehoods from a less than credible witness, and it had taken its toll. Crouch once again began to link the SCHW, the Communist Party, and Joseph Gelders to attempts to infiltrate the White House, without the knowledge of Mrs. Roosevelt or the President. Crouch consistently emphasized the innocence of the Roosevelts, and, this time, the innocence of Hugo Black as to the nature of the SCHW. It was Gelders and Virginia Durr, according to Crouch, who were engaged in espionage and conspiracy in trying to draw the President and the Supreme Court Justice into a Communist spy ring. Crouch testified, “[Black’s] sister-in-law, Mrs. Virginia Foster Durr, had full knowledge of the conspiratorial nature according to the detailed reports that were given by Joseph S. Gelders after his return from conferences with her.”⁷⁹⁵

While Crouch gave his testimony, Cliff gripped the rail of the jury box until his knuckles turned white, then he snapped.⁷⁹⁶ As Crouch stood to leave, Durr, generally a peaceable man, lunged at Crouch, yelling “You son-of-a bitch—talk about my wife like

⁷⁹² SCEF, *Hearings*, 151.

⁷⁹³ “Witness at Red Hearing,” *Washington Post*, 21 March 1954, 1.

⁷⁹⁴ “Probe Witness Ousted on Order by Eastland,” *Times-Picayune*, 21 March 1954, 1; for Horton’s statement, see Myles Horton, “Statement of Myles Horton,” March 1954, SCEF Papers, box 113, folder 2597.

⁷⁹⁵ SCEF, *Hearings*, 154.

⁷⁹⁶ “Durr Charges Wife’s Accuser,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 March 1954, 1, 2.

that and I'll kill you."⁷⁹⁷ U.S. Marshals forcibly restrained Durr, who was shaking with rage, while Crouch stood smiling. While Cliff did not remember exactly what he shouted to Crouch, he did recall that the marshals handled him gently, as if to say they understood the reason for his outburst. John Kohn and Jennings Perry, who attended the hearings, escorted Durr outside the courtroom and laid him on a bench. Fearing a possible heart attack, Durr waited for a doctor, who advised him to go to the hospital for a twenty-four hour observation.⁷⁹⁸ As the doctor led Cliff away, Myles Horton commented, "what difference does it make—they'll assassinate you one way or the other."⁷⁹⁹ The *Montgomery Advertiser* reported, that, although dramatic, the outburst was not surprising, as Durr watched Crouch go through "his familiar sing-song hymn of vague accusations."⁸⁰⁰ According to Virginia, Crouch was a "grinning, lying dog," and that "it just got the best of my husband."⁸⁰¹ After Durr's lunge, Crouch unnecessarily asked for police protection until he left New Orleans.⁸⁰²

The hearings concluded on March 20, after a brief testimony by Richard English about the conspiratorial nature of the Communist Party and its "fellow travelers." After the hearings, Eastland informed the press that he had "no comment" on the testimonies given, but, privately, told reporters that he did not think that either of the Durrs, or Aubrey Williams, were Communists.⁸⁰³ When reporters, in a formal press conference,

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid. Some newspapers reported Durr's words as "You dirty-dog," but Virginia, and Cliff, remember that he actually called Crouch a "son-of-a bitch."

⁷⁹⁸ "Durr Attempts to Attack Crouch," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 20 March 1954, 1, 5A; "Accused Red Lungs at Probe Witness; Second Man Thrown Out," *New Orleans States*, 20 March 1954, 8; Clifford J. Durr, interview, p. 301. Durr agreed to go with the doctor, only after the doctor agreed to send the ambulance away.

⁷⁹⁹ "Accused Red Lungs," 8.

⁸⁰⁰ "Durr Charges," 1.

⁸⁰¹ "Mrs. Durr Assails Charges of Ex-Red," *New York Times*, 22 March 1954, 19.

⁸⁰² "Durr Charges," 1.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

told Arens that they did not feel that the hearings proved any Communist-taint of the SCEF and that the government witnesses failed to impress, Arens replied that “clean cut” witnesses would be best, but they had to use what they had.⁸⁰⁴ Upon his return to Washington, however, Eastland called the SCEF a “particularly vicious organization,” and that the hearings served a “valuable purpose.”⁸⁰⁵ The *Montgomery Advertiser*, however had a different take. Fred Anderson polled reporters covering the hearings as to which of the players in the drama posed the greatest threat to America. Four of the nine votes went to Eastland, two went to Crouch, and one went to Arens.⁸⁰⁶

Nor was the *Advertiser* alone in its conclusion. Nothing came of either the contempt charges against Virginia Durr and James Dombrowski, or of Eastland’s promised further investigation in the South.⁸⁰⁷ Attempting to capitalize on a McCarthy-type fame, Eastland failed miserably. The *St. Petersburg Times* argued that Southern Senators must take responsibility for Eastland, for “there is a matter of Southern honor involved here. A Southern gentlemen and lady have been publicly branded with the most opprobrious term of the hour.”⁸⁰⁸ Alfred Maund reported for *The Nation* that Eastland and his “crew” were “outclassed,” and the attack on Mrs. Durr “was a crude attempt to get Justice Black to excuse himself in the impending Supreme Court decision on

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ “Senator Labels SCEF As Vicious,” *Times-Picayune*, 24 March 1954.

⁸⁰⁶ Perry, “Congressional Inquisition,” 3. Dombrowski and Shlafrock both got one vote a piece.

⁸⁰⁷ Once again, Virginia felt that Johnson kept the investigation from going any further. While she claimed Johnson never openly sided with the Durrs or Aubrey Williams, he worked behind the scenes to make sure the Senate did not pursue the contempt charges. Virginia also felt that Lister Hill might have had a hand in it by helping Eastland get re-elected in exchange for dropping the hearings. (Virginia Durr, interview with Gillette, 51; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi Foreman, 30 December 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 125).

⁸⁰⁸ “Honor and Decency In Government is Joint Responsibility of Both Parties,” *St. Petersburg Times* [Florida], 23 March 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 125.

segregation in public schools.”⁸⁰⁹ It was the Durrs’s position as a Southern ‘lady’ and ‘gentlemen’ that allowed public opinion to rally to their support. Virginia’s attempt to prove herself a proper lady, at least for many in the South, had worked.

Eleanor Roosevelt, in her nationally syndicated column “My Day,” also defended the witnesses at the hearing. Roosevelt did not comment about Cliff, as she said she did not know him well, but she did come to Virginia’s defense. Mrs. Roosevelt wrote that Virginia Durr,

believed that discrimination against anyone was harmful to our nation—and she came from the South! . . . I am not surprised that she denied ever having been a Communist but I wish she might have said what she really believed in. . . .of one thing I am certain, she was never cognizant of any Communist plot to get information from the White House.⁸¹⁰

In addition to Virginia, Roosevelt defended Aubrey Williams, as well as other liberals who believed in desegregation and equality. The article greatly pleased Virginia, and she wrote Mrs. Roosevelt to express her appreciation, telling her “it takes real courage these days to stand up for one’s friends and acquaintances in the face of the fear and hysteria of the times.”⁸¹¹ Durr apologized that Paul Crouch implicated Franklin and Eleanor during the hearing, as the New Deal changed the South for the better. Virginia assured Mrs. Roosevelt that “do not think that [Eastland] speaks for the South. . . .the name of Roosevelt is still held in love and honor in the South.”⁸¹²

⁸⁰⁹ Alfred Maund, “Battle of New Orleans: Eastland Meets His Match,” *The Nation*, 3 April 1954, 282.

⁸¹⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day: Defense of People with Liberal Views,” March 1954, newspaper clipping, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6.

⁸¹¹ Virginia Durr to Eleanor Roosevelt, 31 March 1954, General Correspondence, 1945-1952, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.

⁸¹² *Ibid.*

While the newspapers generally supported the Durrs, they also received numerous personal letters, expressing both the writers' sympathy and disgust at the hearings. Ed Condon, himself a victim of a loyalty hearing, wrote Eastland, protesting the treatment of the Durrs and arguing that Eastland failed to demonstrate any signs of disloyalty from the former FCC Commission or his wife.⁸¹³ Palmer Weber wrote a joint letter to Virginia, Myles, James, and Aubrey, telling them that their behavior was "magnificent and heroic" and offering advice on how to deal with the "fascist and delta bigot" if he were to return to the South or follow up on the contempt charges.⁸¹⁴ Other letters simply offered support to the Durrs and often expressed outrage over their treatment at the hands of James Eastland.⁸¹⁵ Clark Foreman, however, jokingly referred to Cliff's attack on Crouch—"when you decide to get back in the fight you certainly come in slugging. I am glad you didn't take your six-shooter down there."⁸¹⁶ Cliff's brother, James, told Cliff that if he really wanted to kill the man, he should have taken him out to an alley and not attempt murder in a room full of federal marshals.⁸¹⁷

Ironically, when Paul Crouch died in 1955, Clifford Durr wrote his obituary for *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. Although Durr did not admire the man, he argued that Crouch was used by the government and discarded after he served his purpose. Durr wrote, "Crouch did just what he was hired to do and, whatever may be said about him, he gave his

⁸¹³ Ed Condon to James Eastland, 22 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6.

⁸¹⁴ Palmer Weber to Aubrey, Cliff, Virginia, Jim, and Myles, 29 March 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 125.

⁸¹⁵ Will Babcock to Clifford Durr, 27 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6; Edward J. Ivy to Hugo Black, 24 April 1954, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8; Hubert and Muriel Wilson to Clifford J. Durr, telegram, 21 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 7; Walt Lyon to Cliff Durr, 24 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6; Mairi Foreman to Virginia Durr, 21 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6; Mark Ethridge to Virginia Durr, 14 June 1954, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 5; Seymour Kriegar to Clifford Durr, 1 June 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 7; Jackie Oppenheimer to Virginia Durr, 21 April 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6; Dorothy Robinson to Virginia Durr, 29 April 1954, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 5.

⁸¹⁶ Clark Foreman to Clifford Durr, 21 March 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 6.

⁸¹⁷ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 167.

employers full value of what they wanted of him.”⁸¹⁸ In a sense, Durr came to Crouch’s defense, claiming that responsibility lies, not only with those who utter false testimony, but also with those who encourage it.⁸¹⁹

During the Eastland hearings, it was Virginia Durr who, unlike the other witnesses at the hearing, took the boldest and most dangerous stand against the committee. Standing mute, she faced contempt charges and possible jail time. However, the very fact that she was a woman allowed her to act in such a manner. Appearing before the committee in pearls and hat and powdering her nose, she represented the epitome of the Southern lady, and what Southern gentleman would dare to call her conduct into question? It was a facade that Durr frequently hid behind, and used effectively, during her life. By powdering her nose, she was putting on her mask—the mask of white, Southern womanhood. It was also a matter of self-protection. Refusing to answer questions prevented her image from being tarnished and kept her from expressing her views which, would eventually, be turned against her. As Weigand demonstrates, women called before anti-communist committees often emphasized their femininity and “thought it advantageous to portray themselves as ‘typical’ American women.”⁸²⁰ Yet, these women were not “mere appendages to politically active men,” they were often more politically visible and independent than their husbands.⁸²¹ By emphasizing their femininity in the face of hostility, women like Virginia Durr could protect themselves from often ruinous results.

⁸¹⁸ Clifford J. Durr, “A Noted Victim of Paul Crouch Writes the Informer’s Obituary,” *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*, 12 December 1955, 3.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁰ Weigand, “Red Menace,” 85.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER VIII

THE MONTGOMERY FIGHT

While the Durrs received numerous letters of support during the Eastland trial, they returned home to face local ostracism. During the next few years, struggle and frustration marked the Durrs's lives. Their time in Montgomery, however, brought them into the forefront of a national movement. The Civil Rights Movement, in the form of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, began in 1955. The Durrs became swept up in the local movement for black equality and, once again, became involved in the national push for equal rights for African Americans. Feeling that African Americans both welcomed and needed the aid of Southern liberals, Virginia jumped into the battle, only to discover that local blacks were not as willing to embrace an interracial struggle. Their time had come, and the Durrs were not always welcomed onto center stage.⁸²²

If Virginia felt an "outsider" before the Eastland hearing, the feeling became more acute when they returned to Alabama from New Orleans. Former friends and family members began to stop visiting the Durrs or inviting them to social occasions. The black community, however, began to esteem the Durrs and welcome them in their circle,

⁸²² In 2003, Patricia Sullivan published some of Virginia's most expressive letters during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in *Freedom Writer*. It is an excellent source for obtaining a full depiction of the day-by-day and year-by-year trial of living in Montgomery during the 1950s, as well as providing a first hand account of the bus boycott and after.

making the Durrs feel like “heroes rather than heels.”⁸²³ Virginia received a telegram from the black women’s Democratic club in Montgomery, offering the Durrs encouragement after the hearing. When Virginia asked one of the women why they sent the telegram, she replied that if Jim Eastland was against Virginia, then the Durrs must be acceptable.⁸²⁴

However, the Eastland hearing marked a turning point for the Durrs. The elements that characterized their lives during the 1950s and 1960s emerged even stronger after their experience in New Orleans. Social ostracism, financial problems, and local harassment became the hallmarks of the Durrs’ lives. Clifford Durr, six years after the hearing, summed up their position in a letter to Senator John Sparkman,

Doubtless you feel that the New Orleans affair was just an unpleasant experience of no great importance which should be buried and forgotten. However, to us it is not unimportant and we are not permitted to forget it. We are reminded of it daily. . . in our struggle to make a living, in our effort to be part of the community in which I was born and which for me has always been home, and worst of all, in seeing our children suffer on account of it.⁸²⁵

For Cliff, the “most sickening part of it all is that it was done in the name of Americanism.”⁸²⁶ For the next couple of years, the Durrs lived in apprehension that Virginia would be cited on contempt charges (along with Horton and Dombrowski). Upon the release of Eastland’s report, Cliff issued a public statement condemning the

⁸²³ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 30 July 1963, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 135.

⁸²⁴ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 272.

⁸²⁵ Clifford Durr to John Sparkman, March 1960, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 4.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*

Senator and even pushed for charging Crouch with perjury. His efforts came to little. For the most part, the Durrs took her lawyer's advice and tried to remain out of the public eye for a time.⁸²⁷ As Virginia put it in 1957, "all that lovely Southern chivalry is a myth when a woman does something they don't like."⁸²⁸

Initially, Virginia felt that Cliff's position as a "home town boy" who was "wrongfully attacked" would work in their favor; yet, within a year the reality of their position in Montgomery society became apparent.⁸²⁹ Neighbors and acquaintances began to ignore them, and even friends who supported their position took their law business elsewhere. Virginia and Cliff felt particularly hurt that some of their liberal friends from the New Deal days remained silent during their "lynching."⁸³⁰ Even local friends of the Durrs, although supportive, did not hire Cliff's law expertise.⁸³¹ In later years, Virginia claimed that, in some ways, she relished her alienation. She felt that her "cover as a nice, proper Southern lady was blown by the hearing," and that she "felt freed."⁸³² Yet, her letters from the 1950s do not reflect this optimism. Certainly, part of her construction as an "outsider," which she emphasized in later life, allowed her to make this observation. In 1957 she concluded, quite simply, "You have to pay for having principles and that is

⁸²⁷ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 5 June 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 179; Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, 14 September 1955, SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946; "Statement of Clifford J. Durr in regard to the recently released Report of the Eastland Committee," CJD Papers, box 18, folder 1; Clifford Durr to Lister Hill, 3 July 1954, CJD Papers, box 2, folder 7; John P. Kohn to Virginia Durr, 22 June 1955, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 5; Both James Dombrowski and Aubrey Williams also suffered social harassment after the Eastland hearing. Williams endured a public attack from the American Legion. Both his advertising revenue and his journal subscriptions suffered as a result. (see Salmond, "Commie Hunt," 448-449).

⁸²⁸ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 21 February 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128.

⁸²⁹ Virginia Durr to Hugo Black, 16 April 1954, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8.

⁸³⁰ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 9 June 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 125.

⁸³¹ Clifford Durr to John Sparkman; Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 24 September 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 125; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 22 July 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 125; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 9 June 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 126.

⁸³² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 271, 272.

all there is to it.”⁸³³ Virginia’s letters during her life in the post-Eastland period reflects a woman struggling financially and socially and feeling the burden of public ostracism.

Cliff’s isolation from white society caused an increased reliance on African-American clients in his law practice. This plunged Cliff into the fight for civil rights, however much Virginia claimed he had sought to avoid it. Yet most of his clients were unable to pay, as the blacks with means generally sought a more ‘respectable’ white lawyer for their case.⁸³⁴ Although Virginia understood the practical reasons why, it did little to ease their financial burden. During the 1950s, the Durrs constantly worried about paying the rent and office expenses, often having to borrow from friends and relatives to support themselves.⁸³⁵ It must have been reminiscent to Virginia of her own parents’ struggle to survive during the Depression. With money tight, Virginia had little time to devote to social causes. With only one servant, two girls at home, and working as Cliff’s secretary, Virginia also put aside her writing.⁸³⁶

Even a relaxing trip to Maine did little to alleviate the ramifications of the SISS probe, however much they enjoyed getting away from Alabama for a time. Financed by outside sources, Cliff and Virginia enjoyed their first trip to Maine and returned “feeling like new people.”⁸³⁷ However, on their return to Montgomery, Virginia claimed “all Hell had broken loose.”⁸³⁸ The beginning of the school year of 1954 would mark the first

⁸³³ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 11 March 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128.

⁸³⁴ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 9 February 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 18 May 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 126.

⁸³⁵ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 6 April 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 179; Clark Foreman to Virginia Durr, 10 May 1954, VFD Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 125; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 13 May 1954, VFD Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 125. A friend of the Durrs, possibly with the aid of Corliss Lamont, covered Cliff’s hospital bill in New Orleans.

⁸³⁶ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 5 June 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 179.

⁸³⁷ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 13 September 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 179.

⁸³⁸ Durr to Lamont, 13 September 1954.

local attempt to carry out the Supreme Court decision, handed down the previous May, of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

When Virginia returned to the South in 1952, she recognized a different feeling among the African-American community than she had witnessed in 1932. The effects of the Depression and World War II had substantially altered, if not their immediate circumstances, at least the outlook of many blacks about their country. If the New Deal created an atmosphere of reform, World War II sped the progress of civil rights demands. With the migration of blacks into northern cities, the Democratic Party now had a sizeable African-American population to court and the threat of black support for the Republican Party loomed large. Although Roosevelt was no harbinger of civil rights for African Americans, the foundations for a vital civil rights movement were laid in the 1930s and flourished during the 1940s. Membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) reached 450,000 by 1946.⁸³⁹ With the formation of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942, two viable civil rights organizations prepared to enter a new era of struggle. The “Double V” campaign came to signify a direct repudiation of fascism and racism. According to Steven Lawson, World War II, “revitalized black solidarity, tested innovative protest tactics, and moved the federal government closer to the side of racial equality.”⁸⁴⁰

Central to the changes in the desire for racial equality was the white liberal core of the New Deal. While economic and social justice sparked a new wave of activism among New Deal liberals during the 1930s, by the 1940s racial equality began to occupy

⁸³⁹ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 5 June 1954, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 179; Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 331-335; see Paul J. Kellogg, “Civil Rights Consciousness in the 1940s,” *Historian* 42 (1979): 18-41; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 347; Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 9.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

the center stage of debate. The hypocrisy of fighting a war against fascism and systematic racism, while living in a country that allowed segregation, weighed heavily on the conscience of many white liberals. Yet, according to Peter Kellogg, one of the main concerns among white liberals was the effects of racism on the white community.⁸⁴¹

Liberal writer I.F. Stone put forth this concern in 1950: “The white man has degraded himself by degrading the black. The handcuffs of hatred hold both, the jailer and the jailed.”⁸⁴² Racism was the primary concern among several white liberals and helped foster the belief that whites had to solve the problems of segregation and discrimination. White Southern liberals and intellectuals felt that “the underlying assumption was that it was up to the white man to the ‘the problem’ to life up the black brother, to redeem the Negro.”⁸⁴³ This idea limited many liberals to political reform, while they ignored the economic and social reform needed to bring about complete racial justice.⁸⁴⁴

Virginia Durr, an admirer of Stone, also shared his belief that whites suffered under the burden of racism.⁸⁴⁵ Furthermore, Virginia felt that blacks desperately needed the help of a white liberal core in order to obtain freedom, although she doubted if they would receive much credit. She wrote to Clark Foreman,

. . . if no one else will brag on me, I will just go on bragging on myself.

We are among the few people in the world that ever started to do something, and saw it get done and that will have to be our satisfaction because we certainly don’t get any credit for it.⁸⁴⁶

⁸⁴¹ Kellogg, “Civil Rights Consciousness,” 33.

⁸⁴² I.F. Stone, “The Black Man’s Burden,” in *The Truman Era*, 126.

⁸⁴³ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 3d ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 179.

⁸⁴⁴ Kellogg, 40-41.

⁸⁴⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], May 1956, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 119.

⁸⁴⁶ Durr to Foreman, 9 June 1954.

Eleanor Roosevelt echoed Virginia's sentiment by lauding the courage of the Durrs and Aubrey Williams and hoping that the African-American community would offer its appreciation.⁸⁴⁷ The lack of "credit" given to white Southern liberals for their fight for blacks caused an increasing bitterness in Virginia that lasted throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The *Brown* decision had a marked effect on the Montgomery community. The ruling, lambasted by James Eastland as clearly influenced by "communistic and socialistic dogma and principles," prompted the establishment of White Citizens Councils (WCC) throughout the South in resistance to its implementation.⁸⁴⁸ Virginia did not foresee any imminent violence, however, claiming that it was "the calm before the storm."⁸⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Virginia feared the growing strength of the White Citizens Councils, feeling that "the tribal Gods are speaking and the drums are beating and nothing will serve but a blood sacrifice."⁸⁵⁰ Although Virginia did not recall any overt violence following school desegregation, Mrs. Johnny Carr asked Virginia to help protect Carr's son, Arlam. The Sidney Lanier High School desegregated in the fall of 1955 and was across the street from the Durrs' apartment. As the black community came to recognize Cliff and Virginia as sympathetic to their cause, Mrs. Carr asked Virginia if Arlam could come to her apartment if the car pool was late. Although Virginia knew the real reason, to protect Arlam and the other black children from white harassment, she

⁸⁴⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt to Pauli [Murray], 22 February 1956, General Correspondence, 1956-1962, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

⁸⁴⁸ "Eastland Says High Court Influenced by Communists," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 27 May 1955, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 1.

⁸⁴⁹ Durr to Foreman, 25 May 1954.

⁸⁵⁰ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 27 October 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 179.

agreed. Only once did Arlam use the Durrs' home for a safe haven, but the incident marked the Durrs as a source of support for the black community.⁸⁵¹

Cliff also became highly involved in the black community through his law practice. In early 1955, a young African-American lawyer named Fred Gray served as Cliff's aid on a number of cases. One case involved a young girl arrested for violating the city's bus segregation ordinance. The Montgomery bus segregation laws were stricter than in most Southern cities. While blacks sat on the back of the bus, whites filled the front seats. The middle ground constituted an empty row, or a "floating line," to separate the races, particularly to keep black men from contact with white women. In order to obtain their seats, African Americans paid their fares then walked around to the end of the bus to board. Often, the driver would leave before the patron could get on the bus. It was against this injustice on the Montgomery bus system that Claudette Colvin refused to move to the back of the bus. While Gray hoped to use Colvin's case as a test against the bus ordinance, many local blacks, including E.D. Nixon, did not feel that a young, immature, and, as it turned out, pregnant, girl would make a reliable witness. Ultimately, authorities fined and released Colvin.⁸⁵² Later that year, the African-American community had a very different reaction when Rosa Parks was arrested for violating the city's bus segregation ordinance.

Cliff and Virginia met Rosa Parks soon after their return to Montgomery. With three teenage daughters, and money tight, the Durrs often received hand-me-down clothes for the girls. In order to make the clothes fit, Virginia employed Rosa Parks, who

⁸⁵¹ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 275.

⁸⁵² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 25 April 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 126; Gray, *Bus Ride*, 47-48; Clifford J. Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 10; Virginia Durr to Jessica "Dec" Mitford, March 1955, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 84; Branch, *Parting the Waters the Waters*, 14, 122-123; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 171-173.

worked as a seamstress for a local department store. A respected member of the black community, Parks, an active member in the NAACP, headed the NAACP Youth Council in Montgomery at the time of the boycott.⁸⁵³ Martin Luther King, Jr., described Parks as “a charming person with a radiant personality, soft spoken and calm in all situations. Her character was impeccable and her dedication deep rooted.”⁸⁵⁴ Virginia Durr also shared King’s assessment of Parks, characterizing her as “so brave and so intelligent and so determined.”⁸⁵⁵ Despite Durr’s claim that the Eastland trial had liberated her from respectability, she continued to venerate the image of the Southern lady and her attributes. Recalling Rosa Parks, Durr described her as “the perfect Southern lady. She’s extremely well-mannered, rather shy and timid.”⁸⁵⁶ Virginia gave a similar description of Coretta Scott King: “Mrs. King was a perfect Southern lady.”⁸⁵⁷ Being a “lady” still constituted a benchmark of respectability for Durr; what made her usage radical was Virginia’s application of the term to African-American women.

Virginia established a personal relationship with Parks, lending her books and taking her to integrated prayer meetings. Their friendship, and the respect Virginia had for Parks, prompted her to recommend Rosa for a scholarship to Highlander Folk School in the summer of 1955. Parks, who attended a workshop on the implementation of the *Brown* decision, felt that her experience at Highlander, for the first time, made her feel equal to whites. Durr ultimately credited Parks’s experience at Highlander as attributing

⁸⁵³ Clifford Durr, unpublished autobiography, CJD Papers, box 17, folder 10; Virginia Durr, interview by Linda Reed, 29; J. Mills Thornton III, “Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956,” *The Alabama Review* 33 (1980): 195; Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 51.

⁸⁵⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 44.

⁸⁵⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark [Foreman], Palmer [Weber], and Corliss [Lamont], 24 February 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

⁸⁵⁶ Cynthia Brown Stokes, “Rosa Parks,” *Southern Exposure* (Spring 1981): 16.

⁸⁵⁷ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 278.

to Parks's inability to tolerate segregation any longer and prompting her decision to violate the bus segregation law.⁸⁵⁸

Parks's arrest on December 1, 1955, was not the first time the black community had challenged the bus segregation law. Police arrested Claudette Colvin only months before, as well as another black woman named Mary Louise Smith who refused to give up her seat to a white woman. Parks herself had been kicked off a bus in 1940s for a similar action. For a number of years, the Women's Political Council, a collection of black women leaders centered at Alabama State College, advocated a boycott in protest of the laws.⁸⁵⁹ By 1955, in the wake of the *Brown* decision, the arrest of Parks proved to be the perfect catalyst for a city-wide boycott. When local police arrested Parks for failing to give up her seat to a white man, E.D. Nixon immediately telephoned Clifford Durr. Nixon, a sleeping car porter who had been active in civil rights in Montgomery for more than twenty years, asked Durr to call the jail to find out why Parks was in custody.

⁸⁶⁰ Nixon agreed to make bond for Parks, and Cliff to accompanied him to the jail. Virginia, at home and overhearing the conversation, refused to be left behind.⁸⁶¹

Nixon and the Durrs took Parks home to discuss the course of action. While Nixon sought Cliff's advice to the feasibility of challenging the segregation law, it was

⁸⁵⁸ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 7 December 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 126; Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 85-86, 91-93; Rosa Parks to Mrs. Shipherd, 6 July 1955, in Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 82; Glen, *Highlander*, 136. By the 1950s, Highlander had turned its attention to the problems of racism. The school began holding citizenship schools for whites and blacks as well as workshops on desegregation.

⁸⁵⁹ David J. Garrow, ed. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 16-17.

⁸⁶⁰ John White, "E.D. Nixon and the White Supremacists," in Glenn Feldman, ed., *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 199-206; Nixon also served as a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the NAACP, as well as the head of the Montgomery Negro and Civil Improvement Association. In 1954, Nixon also ran for public office in Montgomery, the first black since Reconstruction to do so in Alabama.

⁸⁶¹ Clifford J. Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 17, folder 10; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 280; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 129-130. Nixon feared that the police would not release Parks unless he was accompanied by a white man.

understood that a black lawyer, namely Fred Gray, would handle the case. Ultimately, Parks decided to use her arrest as a test case, a decision that frightened her husband.⁸⁶² Yet, Parks, who belonged to the working class, yet was “dignified enough in manner, speech and dress to command the respect of the leading classes,” remained adamant about her decision.⁸⁶³ According to Martin Luther King, “the arrest and conviction of Mrs. Parks had a twofold impact: it was a precipitating factor to arouse Negroes to positive action; and it was a test of the validity of the segregation law itself.”⁸⁶⁴ It also served to unite the black community of Montgomery on an unprecedented scale.

News of Parks’s arrest spread quickly through the community. While Nixon telephoned the community leaders, the Women’s Political Council published leaflets encouraging local blacks to boycott the bus the following Monday. Nixon also scheduled a mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church for that Monday evening. It was at the historic meeting that Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., a twenty-six year old minister and newcomer to Montgomery, was elected head of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Cliff and Virginia, who tried to attend the mass meeting at the church, never got inside the door, although they heard King’s speech via loudspeakers. Thousands of people came to the mass meeting, where it was decided the boycott should continue until the bus company agreed to better treatment for black passengers. Ultimately, after months of boycotting, leaders decided that the boycott would be used to challenge local segregation laws.⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁶² Durr, unpublished autobiography, box 17, folder 10; Virginia Durr, interview by Linda Reed, 19-30.

⁸⁶³ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 130.

⁸⁶⁴ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 55.

⁸⁶⁵ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 131-142; Brown, “Rosa Parks,” 18; Rev. Thomas R. Thrasher, “Alabama’s Bus Boycott,” in David J. Garrow, ed., *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989): 61; Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 147; *Montgomery Advertiser*, 6 December 1955; see also, Garrow, *Montgomery Bus Boycott*.

During the ensuing boycott, which lasted more than a year, the Durrs worked primarily behind the scenes. By the time of the protest, Virginia and Cliff had been involved with the black community for at least two years and had established relationships with many of the community leaders. Virginia's excitement over the boycott was tremendous, calling it a "second Emancipation taking place in the Cradle of the Confederacy."⁸⁶⁶ Cliff aided Fred Gray in Parks's case, and proved to be, according to Gray, "a great behind-the-scenes lawyer throughout the Montgomery Bus Boycott and was very important to me. . . .more than any other person, [Cliff] taught me how to practice law."⁸⁶⁷ Cliff also helped defend blacks arrested during the boycott for minor traffic violations.⁸⁶⁸ For Virginia, years of isolation from the larger world were broken, as the boycott brought her back into the fight for social and racial justice.

Virginia retold the story of Parks's arrest in an unfinished short story titled "My Eyes Have Seen the Glory." In her account, the narrator assumes the role of a bystander on the bus who witnesses the arrest of a black woman who refused to give up her seat. After the arrest of the "slender mulatto woman with her arms full of groceries," the narrator becomes consumed with worry about the safety of the black woman.⁸⁶⁹ Although frightened that the police might have beaten the woman, the storyteller returns home, and "went about getting supper and all the time I lived through the scene on the bus, the silence, the fear, the frozen feeling."⁸⁷⁰ When the narrator's husband returns

⁸⁶⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark, Palmer, and Corliss, 24 February 1956.

⁸⁶⁷ Gray, *Bus Ride*, 47-48.

⁸⁶⁸ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 17 December 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

⁸⁶⁹ Virginia Foster Durr, "My Eyes Have Seen the Glory," unpublished draft of short story, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 1, folder 67.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

home, they agree to go to the jail to help secure the release of the woman.⁸⁷¹ Although Durr never completed her story, she obviously merged her own experience that day with a fictional woman who observed the arrest. Understanding the monumental events that were taking place in Montgomery during the mid-1950s, the Montgomery Bus Boycott sparked Virginia's desire to write again, perhaps to capture the events of the period in fiction.

Virginia did not shy away when the boycott, "which is really making history and is of the deepest significance," began.⁸⁷² Throughout the boycott, Virginia gave rides to many African Americans, including her wash woman, whom she picked up in the morning and took home at night. At the urging of Rosa Parks, Virginia also agreed to give a speech at Dexter Avenue church, although she feared the publicity it might bring.⁸⁷³ There was little doubt, either among the black or white community, as to where the Durrs' sympathies resided. Consequently, the social ostracism of the post-Eastland period became even more entrenched. The law practice suffered, as Cliff's few clients turned elsewhere, and, once again, making a living became a serious challenge. The activism of Cliff and Virginia was perhaps hardest on their daughter, Tilla. Lucy left for Radcliff in the fall of 1955, and the youngest, Lulah, was not yet a teenager.⁸⁷⁴ Virginia worried about the effects that their position in Montgomery was having on Tilla, writing

⁸⁷¹ Ibid.

⁸⁷² Virginia Durr to Myles and Zilphia [Horton], 30 January 1956, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 103.

⁸⁷³ Brown, "Rosa Parks," 18; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 7 December 1955. In her autobiography, Virginia recalls how most of the black women would not admit to supporting the boycott, even if they knew the Durrs sympathized. Instead, they would evade the issue and make up excuses for not riding the buses. White women, who felt they could not do without their servants, readily accepted these ploys and continued to drive the women to and from work each day. See Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 282-283.

⁸⁷⁴ Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 176-177; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 9 February 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

to the Foremans, “how she has suffered! And how we have suffered with her.”⁸⁷⁵ In the spring of 1956, Tilla left for the Cambridge School in Weston, Massachusetts, her tuition paid for by Jessica “Decca” Mitford. Removing Tilla from Montgomery was an enormous relief to Virginia and allowed her to continue the fight without worrying about the negative effects on her children.⁸⁷⁶

Both during and after the boycott, Virginia became increasingly concerned about the welfare of Rosa Parks. Durr began writing letters to ‘progressive’ supporters to obtain money for Parks, who lost her job after her arrest. Virginia managed more than five hundred dollars for Parks and her family who were struggling financially even more than the Durrs. Virginia became frustrated that the black community was not taking care of Parks and that the Montgomery Improvement Association did not help her financially. Durr felt that Parks was increasingly bitter at the MIA and King who refused to give her a job. Durr also obtained the help of the ECLC to raise funds for Parks.⁸⁷⁷ Virginia’s friendship with Parks was not the only motivation for her concern. Undoubtedly she felt akin to Parks who suffered so much for making a controversial stand. As she told Clark Foreman, “to be a heroine is fine but it does not pay off.”⁸⁷⁸ Ultimately, unable to make a living, Parks left Montgomery during the late 1950s. At the farewell party, Durr gave a speech praising Parks’s character and her courage.⁸⁷⁹

⁸⁷⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi, 19 April 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

⁸⁷⁶ Lucy Durr Hackney, interview with author; Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 100. Later, Lulah also left Montgomery to go to school in Massachusetts for similar reasons.

⁸⁷⁷ Virginia Durr to Jessica ‘Dec’ Mitford, 13 January 1956, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 106; Clark Foreman to Virginia Durr, 28 February 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127; Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 15 March 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127; Durr to Clark and Mairi, 19 April 1956; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128; Durr to Foreman, 15 February 1957; Clark Foreman to Corliss Lamont, 28 February 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 180.

⁸⁷⁸ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

⁸⁷⁹ Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, 27 August 1957, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 151-152.

While Virginia admired the unity of the black community during the boycott, she increasingly had her doubts about King's leadership, both before and after the protest in Montgomery. While she felt that he did an admirable job at uniting African Americans in the city, she never felt close to him and thought he lacked the political experience to be completely effective.⁸⁸⁰ Instead, she championed the leadership of both Charles Gomillion, a professor of sociology at Tuskegee Institute, whom she considered the "symbol of the Negro struggle in the South," and of E.D. Nixon, whom she felt stressed the importance of voting rights and "really likes white people more than King. . .he distinguishes between the good and bad and does not damn them tooth and nail."⁸⁸¹ By the late 1950s, Virginia felt that King and the NAACP were involved in "red-baiting" and disassociating themselves from white liberals, such as Aubrey Williams, who had been tainted by Communist accusations.⁸⁸² Increasingly, Virginia began to fear black separatism and questioned non-violent activism. Not that Virginia favored violence, she only felt that voting and court challenges were ultimately the most effective methods of success. She wrote Clark Foreman in 1957, expressing her concern:

Mr. Nixon feels as I do that the non-violent, Ghandi [sic] and FOR [Fellowship of Reconciliation] approach has its merits and certainly did in the bus boycott but in the long run the legal and political arms are more important and have to be depended on.⁸⁸³

⁸⁸⁰ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 12 February 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 14 October 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 129.

⁸⁸¹ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 9 February 1959, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 132; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 15 February 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128.

⁸⁸² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 20 October 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 131; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128.

⁸⁸³ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 28 February 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128.

The bus boycott, which gave Virginia an impetus to renew her struggle for civil rights, prompted her to begin to focus her attention, once again, on voting rights for African Americans.

By the fall of 1956, Virginia began promoting the idea of establishing registration and voting offices in the South. Although, according to Virginia, the NAACP did not support the idea, whites both in and outside of the South had a great deal of enthusiasm for it. The offices were to be non-partisan, although Virginia hoped that liberal Democratic forces would support the idea and pull African Americans away from the Republican Party. In the spring of 1957, Virginia went to New York to raise money for the Franchise Aid Fund, as it came to be called, which was connected to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, headed by Clark Foreman. The voting registration offices were to follow the example of the Progressive Democrats in Montgomery, led by E.D. Nixon. During her trip, which Virginia feared she did not have the energy to undertake, she raised more than two thousand dollars, split between the Franchise Aid Fund and the ECLC. Some of the money went to the Progressive Democrats, where Rosa Parks worked as secretary.⁸⁸⁴ The success of the campaign greatly pleased Virginia, and she was happy to “make some use” of herself again.⁸⁸⁵ Although Clark encouraged Virginia to return north to raise more money, she declined, stating she was too overwhelmed and exhausted to undertake another trip. She also felt disappointed that the Franchise Aid Fund failed to create a large number of black voters in the South.⁸⁸⁶ By the late 1950s,

⁸⁸⁴ Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, 2 October 1956, SCEF Papers, box 101, folder 1946; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 7 January 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128; Clark Foreman to Virginia Durr, 25 January 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128; Durr to Foreman, 28 February 1957; Clark Foreman to Virginia Durr, 15 April 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128; Virginia Durr to Corliss and Margaret Lamont, 25 April 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 180.

⁸⁸⁵ Durr to Foreman, 7 January 1957.

⁸⁸⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 10 November 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 131.

Virginia was pleased to see Lyndon Johnson's support of a federal anti-poll tax amendment, albeit "twenty five years after."⁸⁸⁷ Durr never retracted her strong belief in voting rights and democracy to secure civil rights and civil liberties for all American citizens.

True to form, Virginia also began to write letters denouncing the continued segregation in the armed forces. Pumping more than \$50 million a year into Montgomery, Maxwell and Gunther Air Force bases stimulated the city's economy after World War II.⁸⁸⁸ Despite Truman's integration of the military, black servicemen continued to be segregated and often harassed once they left the bases. Virginia expressed her desire for a bill to be introduced into Congress, making discrimination against any servicemen illegal. She also wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt, proposing that federal money for the Air Force bases be terminated until the practice of segregation off the bases stopped. Unfortunately, Mrs. Roosevelt quoted Virginia's letter to a senior member of the Army, who, in turn, sent it to the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce. Virginia spent over an hour one day listening to the President of the Chamber of Commerce tell her the error of her ways. Nevertheless, Durr also petitioned Lyndon Johnson, asking him to push for justice for blacks in the Armed Services.⁸⁸⁹

Personally, the Durrs continued to struggle during the 1950s. Their open support of the boycott increased their isolation from both friends and family. A letter written to

⁸⁸⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 13 August 1959, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 123.

⁸⁸⁸ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 13.

⁸⁸⁹ Durr to Foreman, 20 October 1958; Virginia Durr to Nate [Otto Nathan], n.d., in Burns, *Daybreak*, 153; Virginia Durr to General Wilton B. Persons, 26 May 1960, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 6; Virginia Durr to Eleanor Roosevelt, 16 January 1957, General Correspondence, 1956-1962, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 22 May 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 131; Virginia Durr to Lyndon Johnson, 9 January 1959, LJB Papers, Selected Names, box 17.

Clark Foreman during the boycott demonstrates how Virginia did not appreciate being an “outsider.” She writes

If we survive down here it will be a miracle—[Cliff] has lots more determination and courage to stick it out than I have. I like to belong and feel a part of things and not be outside a group—I am not a lonely martyr and want lots of other martyrs around, but [Cliff] seems to go on and find Montgomery the best place to be in spite of the fact that we are not “in” at all. . . .⁸⁹⁰

It was not a conscious decision to isolate herself from other whites, but simply a result of her personal convictions. At times, they seemed too much for her to bear. She began to understand that the South had been able to maintain its system of racism and Jim Crow for so long because “[the South] punishes its dissenters so badly that no one dares do it.”⁸⁹¹ Cliff’s family considered him to have left their fold, and, as Virginia concluded, “once you do that you are forever and forever an outsider.”⁸⁹² Not until much later did Virginia accept her position as an “outsider”; during the 1950s and 1960s, it was a continuous source of pain.

Physical problems and death also challenged Virginia’s forbearance. The strain of living in Montgomery began to cause physical problems for Virginia. She began to have back and neck problems, which she attributed to “nervous strain,” and was eventually hospitalized for a time.⁸⁹³ In 1956, Virginia’s brother, Sterling, died, leaving her as the last of her family. She mourned Sterling’s life and blamed the society that

⁸⁹⁰ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, n.d., VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

⁸⁹¹ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 22 May 1959, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 132.

⁸⁹² Ibid.

⁸⁹³ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 126; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi Foreman, 30 July 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

reared him, feeling that he was essentially a good, kind, “charming southern” man, although his views on humanity were “thwarted and distorted by this savage and cruel society.”⁸⁹⁴ In 1957, Cliff and Tilla suffered minor injuries from an auto accident, and a fire destroyed part of the Durr’s home.⁸⁹⁵

Cliff’s law practice continued to suffer, and Virginia once again appealed to friends for financial help. While Cliff was pleased to aid Fred Gray on numerous cases, he received no payment for his services. The ECLC’s Bill of Rights Fund provided the Durrs with a grant for one thousand dollars, for which Virginia copiously thanked Corliss Lamont.⁸⁹⁶ It was difficult for Virginia, who claimed that “[Southern liberals] still have to depend on the Yankees for our living as much as we hate it.”⁸⁹⁷ Virginia was also distressed about the upcoming marriage of their daughter, Lucy, to Sheldon Hackney. Being “incurably southern,” Virginia wanted a church wedding for their daughter, although she doubted that they could afford it.⁸⁹⁸ Fortunately, Lucy received enough money in wedding gifts to help with some of the expenses. Another source of tension was Virginia’s concern about Jessica Mitford attending the wedding. Josephine Black had been asked to serve as one of Lucy’s bridesmaids, and Virginia worried about putting the Black family in an unfavorable position. She wrote Hugo, warning him that the papers would undoubtedly mention the ‘radical’ Decca’s presence and that Virginia did not want to do anything that might jeopardize Hugo’s position. After the Eastland hearings, Durr’s

⁸⁹⁴ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127.

⁸⁹⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 8 July 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 129; Clark Foreman to Virginia Durr, 2 December 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 129; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, n.d., VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 129.

⁸⁹⁶ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 25 June 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 180; Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 1 July 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 180; Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 18 July 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 180; Virginia Durr to Mr. and Mrs. Corliss Lamont, 15 January 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 3, folder 180.

⁸⁹⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, January 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 130.

⁸⁹⁸ Durr to Foreman, Spring 1957.

sensitivity about her own reputation increased, and, at times, she avoided contact with Hugo in order to avoid further public scandal that might hurt his already dubious reputation among Southern whites. In the end, Josephine chose not to attend the wedding, a decision that must have solidified Virginia's feelings of abandonment by family and friends.⁸⁹⁹

As with most white Southerners who supported the civil rights protests, the Durrs became targets of local harassment. Most white liberals suffered harassment during the civil rights era, forcing them, like the Durrs, to turn even more inward and to depend on one another for support. Reporting on Virginia's attendance at MIA meetings and her relationship with Rosa Parks, the FBI continued to trail Cliff and Virginia. Virginia received several threatening phone calls during the 1950s. Virginia, however, was most upset about the weakening of The Fellowship of the Concerned, an interracial and interdenominational group of women to which Virginia belonged. Not only did the attendance of African Americans make the group subject to white harassment, but Catholic and Jewish women also attended the meetings. By 1958, white supremacists, showing up on their doorsteps and telephoning in the middle of the night, targeted individual women in the group. Many women, afraid to go to the police, began to disassociate themselves from the group.⁹⁰⁰ Virginia began to fear that "we have been

⁸⁹⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi, 21 June 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 129; Virginia Durr to Hugo Black, 5 June 1957, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 5; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 26 January 1955, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 126. Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 144-145, 146; Much to the family's chagrin, Virginia invited the family's black servants to the wedding, although they were told they had to sit in the old slave balcony at the church. (Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 11 March 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128).

⁹⁰⁰ Richard Maxwell Brown, "Southern Violence vs. the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968," in *Perspectives on the American South: An Annual Review of Society, Politics, and Culture*, vol. I, Merle Black and Sheldon Reeds, eds. (New York: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1981): 54; "Virginia Foster Durr," 22 May 1959, FBI file, 1-10; "Clifford J. Durr," 23 May 1959, FBI file, 1-6; Virginia Durr to Marge [Franz], October 1958, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 168-169; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 20

abandoned by the rest of the country and by the government and left to the tender mercies of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council.”⁹⁰¹

The Supreme Court ruling in *Browder v. Gayle*, which struck down the bus segregation laws in Alabama, did little to end the tension in the city. While the boycott came to an end by December of 1957, white backlash continued. During the boycott, segregationists bombed the homes of both King and Nixon, although no one was seriously hurt. On a January night in 1958, four black churches and two homes were bombed, including that of a white minister Robert Graetz, who supported the boycotts. Although the Durrs invited the Graetz family to stay with them, the minister declined. Not surprisingly, the white men arrested for the bombings were not convicted.⁹⁰² The violence during the bus boycott and its aftermath impacted Virginia’s views of the South. While she had never been blindly devoted to her region, and never shared the same love for Alabama that Cliff did, she became increasingly bitter toward white Southerners after the boycott.

It was particularly the poor white Southerners that angered Virginia. Suffering from “pellagra of the soul,” Virginia claimed these whites feared economic competition from blacks and covered their resentment with racism and hatred.⁹⁰³ Virginia summed up her feelings about white Southern men in a letter to Mairi and Clark Foreman:

I do not believe there is on the face of the earth a more unattractive specimen of humanity than a poor white Southerner, full of prejudice,

October 1958, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 170-171; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 18 December 1958, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 172-173.

⁹⁰¹ Virginia Durr to Mildred Olmstead, June 1958, as quoted in Sullivan, *Days*, 275.

⁹⁰² Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 197-199; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 287. The other home belonged to Ralph Abernathy, whose wife and baby were alone in the house at the time. A bundle of lit dynamite was found on the porch of Dr. King’s home only two weeks later.

⁹⁰³ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 22 May 1959, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 132.

false religion, fear, hatred and abasement before the rich. . . .My distaste for white southern males has only been reinforced by living among them, a race of men who have long ago given up their courage and pride in manhood, and been reduced to cowards and bullies by having the Negroes so humble.⁹⁰⁴

In fairness, Virginia admitted that wealthy Southern men were equally as weak, but managed to “cover it over with a lot of sweet talk.”⁹⁰⁵ Her love of the South and its people was waning by the late 1950s, and she began to find it the most “ignorant, narrow, prejudiced and stupid society that could be found.”⁹⁰⁶ She frankly admitted that she was still a “snob,” but finding forgiveness and tolerance became increasingly difficult.⁹⁰⁷ Even former friends, such as Lister Hill and John Sparkman, signed the Southern Manifesto in 1956, and Virginia watched as her cousin John Patterson, running on a platform of white supremacy, won the governorship in 1958, defeating George Wallace. Wallace, who vowed to never be beaten by a segregationist again, turned his platform into one of virulent white supremacy in 1962. By 1958, she told Hugo Black that she no longer even liked white Southerners and that their violent irrationality truly frightened her.⁹⁰⁸

Virginia discussed her disdain for white Southern men in an unpublished short story titled, “Homo Americanus—Sui Cenerississippi.” In the story, a woman and her husband have a conversation with a truck driver at a road-side café. The white driver,

⁹⁰⁴ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 20 October 1959, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 132.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁶ Durr to Foreman, 9 February 1956.

⁹⁰⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 11 February 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 128.

⁹⁰⁸ Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 96-97; “10,000 in Alabama Hail Segregation,” *New York Times*, 11 February 1956, 1; Virginia Durr to Hugo Black, 18 June 1958, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8.

a Mississippi native who was transporting ammunition, begins to tell the couple about his experiences with munitions during World War II. During his reminiscences, he describes his experiences fighting the “Japs,” his views of the “chinks,” and his sexual desire for the women overseas. The driver then describes his friendship with a “big, black African nigger,” during the war. The talk then turns to the murder of a young black boy in Mississippi, obviously a reference to the murder of Emmet Till, who was lynched in 1955. The driver claims he knows nothing about the murder, but, if the boy did whistle at a white woman, he got his due. According to the driver, “Niggers is niggeres [sic] and they got to learn to act like niggers, and if they don’t know they got to be taught.” The driver abruptly leaves, and the story ends with the woman exasperated at the hypocrisy and irrationality of the man. The husband then turns to his wife and says, “Honey when will you learn that men are not logical and just don’t expect them to be.”⁹⁰⁹ The absurdity and violence of Southern white men, and in the case of this story, a working-class white, frustrated Virginia and made her more critical of the South and its males.

The burgeoning civil rights struggle caused Virginia to reflect again on the position of Southern woman. Almost all promoters of white supremacy expressed the fear of miscegenation. Ultimately, Virginia felt that this “cesspool of the South,” as Virginia termed it, was at the heart of the resistance of integration.⁹¹⁰ She was frustrated that the debates over desegregating the buses centered around a white woman having a black man sit next to her. The intersection of sex and race is a theme Durr discusses often in her autobiography, and a justification for racism of which she increasingly became tired. She felt that white women had more grievances against white men than did

⁹⁰⁹ Virginia Foster Durr, “Homo Americanus—Sui Cenerississippi,” draft of unpublished short story, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 1, folder 67.

⁹¹⁰ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 288.

any African American.⁹¹¹ For Durr, white men, who vowed to protect white Southern womanhood, had created a culture of stagnation for Southern women, and the results of such a society began to trouble her increasingly in her later years:

I suppose I will never get over at heart being an old-fashioned southern girl in white organdy and pink roses and seeing romance in every man that came by! But God Save Us from the old Southern belles forty years later, who are still full of airs and graces, fat, ugly, frowzy and often gin soaked. . . .but even they are not as bad as the brave, silent sufferers, who go through life smiling bravely and silently and bearing up nobly and making all of their children and husband too feel like a heel. They have missed romance too, but they don't take to gin, they take to sadism.⁹¹²

Those that challenged the role of the passive, supportive, Southern woman, Virginia feared, ended up like Juliette Morgan, a local librarian who criticized the WCC and the racism of white men. Morgan lost her job, faced local harassment, and eventually committed suicide.⁹¹³

Not only Southern whites began to disillusion Virginia by the late 1950s, she became increasingly resentful of the lack of appreciation shown her for her support by the African-American community. Initially, Virginia welcomed an all-black movement for civil rights, telling Jessica Mitford, "this is their show, they have shown us the way in my

⁹¹¹ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 20 November 1956, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 127; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 43-44, 104, 123, 172, 175, 287-288, 327; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], n.d., VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 131; see also Virginia Durr to Jessica "Dec" Mitford, 5 May 1955, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 86-87.

⁹¹² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 3 August 1959, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 132.

⁹¹³ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 11 February 1957, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 137; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 22 July 1957, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 150-151.

opinion.”⁹¹⁴ Yet, years of isolation and harassment were taking its toll on Virginia. While Cliff seemed content to work behind the scenes, Virginia felt that whites also needed to be recognized and supported by the black community. She was concerned particularly for Aubrey Williams, shunned by white Montgomery and alienated from the black community because of his Communist ‘taint.’ (Cliff’s aunt had stated that she had a large pecan tree in her yard if anyone cared to lynch Williams.⁹¹⁵) Virginia’s letters to Clark Foreman indicate her growing resentment at being looked over for recognition. She wrote Clark in 1958, “the day of victory is dawning but the victors do not want to admit the fact that any white persons helped them get it. . . .that is sometimes embittering.”⁹¹⁶ However, she felt that “[African American’s] victory is mine as I want to see the South free from this terrible incubus of the past so I can live in peace and harmony.”⁹¹⁷ Later that year, she told Clark,

The idea that the Negroes welcome liberal whites needs some explanation. They welcome them if they can help them and if they don’t need money and if they can row their own canoe. . . .I can tell you from our own experience that if we had to depend on the Negroes, we would starve to death. . . .I do not blame them, they have had too hard a row to hoe, they still are faced with such horrible burdens and they have not gotten to the point where they can think of helping out the white man yet.⁹¹⁸

In 1973, however, Fred Gray acknowledged the work of Cliff and Virginia during the Montgomery Bus Boycott:

⁹¹⁴ Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, January-March 1956, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 114-115.

⁹¹⁵ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 1957, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 129.

⁹¹⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 29 January 1959, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 130.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid.

⁹¹⁸ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 17 March 1958, VFD Schlesinger Papers, box 2, folder 130.

Cliff and Virginia occupy a most important and significant role so far as the struggle of blacks in Montgomery and in Alabama. This role for the most part has been a behind the scene role, but without which it would have been almost impossible for the movement to have survived.⁹¹⁹

Although the accolades were long in coming, Virginia continued to help in the continuing struggle for civil rights that dominated the decade of the 1960s.

⁹¹⁹ F. D. Gray to Bryce W. Rucker, 30 January 1973, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 1.

CHAPTER IX

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE TURBULENT 60s

Writing in the wake of the *Brown* decision, columnist I.F. Stone hoped that Southern tempers would have time to cool before the courts implemented the decision, but correctly foresaw that “Jim Crow will not be ended overnight.”⁹²⁰ Despite Stone’s prediction that whites would openly defy desegregation of the South, the Montgomery Bus Boycott permanently changed African Americans in Montgomery. Their success subsequently prompted a national struggle for civil rights. Following the boycott, a janitor summed up the attitude of blacks in Montgomery: “We got our heads up now, and we won’t ever bow down again—no, sir—except before God!”⁹²¹ Virginia watched in wonder and frustration as the Civil Rights Movement fostered the growing “movement” among America’s youth by the late 1960s. She continued to be actively involved in civil rights activities while in Montgomery, but, by the late 1960s, began to question the goals and methods of the “movement”.

Financial difficulties continued to preoccupy the Durrs during the decade of the 1960s. With the death of Cliff’s mother, who had been an invalid for some time, it looked as though their financial situation might improve; however, once they paid their debts, the amount left to Cliff was less than half of the original. While Cliff continued to

⁹²⁰ I.F. Stone, *The Best of I.F. Stone* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 167.

⁹²¹ Abel Penn, “Report on Montgomery a Year After,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 29 December 1957, 36.

defend African Americans in his practice, for little positive recognition, an important case came his way during the early 1960s. It involved a group of white college students and their professor who had traveled South in 1960 to study race relations. The students lunched at a black café with a group of African Americans, and local police subsequently arrested the group for disturbing the peace. The charges against the students were dropped, but in the case of *Nesmith v. Alford*, Cliff served as the professor's defense attorney. A local jury found Nesmith guilty and imposed a fine. Cliff appealed, and the case eventually ended up in the Fifth Circuit court of appeals in 1963, which ruled the arrests illegal. Despite Cliff and Virginia's tiresome work, they only received \$1,500 in legal fees.⁹²²

In the midst of Cliff's law work, another phase of the Civil Rights Movement came to Montgomery. Influenced by the success of the sit-in movement in North Carolina, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) decided to test the 1960 Supreme Court ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia*, which prohibited segregation in interstate transportation. The "freedom rides" also became a test for non-violent direct action. In the spring of 1961, CORE members began their ride in Washington, D.C., moving into the Deep South. President Kennedy's approach to civil rights resembled a "patchwork," providing "some encouragement to civil rights supporters, while also undermining the federal government's ability to support the forces of change in the South."⁹²³ Although President Kennedy did not openly support the riders for fear of alienating the Southern

⁹²² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 17 July 1959, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 132; "Racial Suits Filed," newspaper clipping, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 5; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 7 April 1960, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 133; Virginia Durr to Ann [Lyon], 4 October 1961, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 6; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 189-191; see also Clifford J. Durr, "Sociology and the Law: A Field Trip to Montgomery, Alabama," in *Southern Justice*, Leon Friedman, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963): 43-56.

⁹²³ Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 232.

Democratic core, white violence and mob attacks in cities like Birmingham, Montgomery, and Jackson, Mississippi forced Kennedy to act.⁹²⁴

When the Freedom Riders arrived in Montgomery in May of 1961, Jessica “Decca” Mitford, who was writing an article on the South, stayed with the Durrs. On a May morning, Virginia and Decca went into Montgomery to Cliff’s office and watched helplessly as a white mob quickly surrounded the bus as it entered the city. Although police protection was noticeably absent, Decca insisted on going into the crowd. Virginia watched from the office windows as whites beat African Americans while police stood by.⁹²⁵ Virginia recalled the crowd yelling “get the niggers,” as they held their children up so they could “see the niggers run.”⁹²⁶ The violence terrified Virginia, and she concluded that much of her “hope” for the people in the South “disappeared” on that May morning.⁹²⁷ While Attorney General Robert Kennedy ordered federal marshals to Montgomery, the black community planned a mass meeting for the following day.

Although Decca suffered from physical shock after the riot, she insisted on returning to Montgomery to attend the meeting at the First Baptist Church. The Durrs cautioned Decca and worried for her safety but agreed to let her borrow their car. Decca, disregarding Virginia’s advice to park blocks away from the meeting, parked the car in front of the church. The Durrs listened on the radio as a white mob, numbering close to a

⁹²⁴ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 33-35. See also Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹²⁵ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 296-297; Virginia Durr to Robins, 25 July 1960, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 6; “Alabama’s Capital Decides It’s an Island unto Itself,” 23 May 1961, *The Evening News* [Harrisburg, PA], newspaper clipping, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 5; Carson, *In Struggle*, 35-36.

⁹²⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 297.

⁹²⁷ Durr to Robins. Cliff came to the legal defense of two white bystanders, Fred and Anna Gash, who refused to watch the innocent riders beaten in the street. A court found the Gashes guilty and imposed a fine, although, through appeal, Cliff managed to get their fines reduced. (See Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 187-189).

thousand, gathered around the church while King and Abernathy preached. Although Robert Kennedy guaranteed federal protection for the meeting, a riot erupted by the time the marshals arrived. Trapping the group inside until late into the night, the mob threw bricks at passing cars and hurled tear gas into the church windows. When Decca returned to the Durrs' home, she broke the news to Virginia that the crowd had burned her car. A rioter put a lit match into the gas tank. Before the Freedom Riders left Montgomery on May 23, Governor Patterson, reluctant to support the riders, ultimately declared Montgomery under martial law and sent in eight hundred national guardsmen to restore order.⁹²⁸ According to Clayborne Carson, the freedom rides "contributed to the development of a self-consciously radical southern student movement prepared to direct its militancy toward other concerns."⁹²⁹ By the mid-1960s, these rights expanded to include voting and economic rights for African Americans.

The harassing phone calls that followed the car burning became just a few of many threatening incidents that the Durrs faced during the early 1960s. In 1960, Nat Henthoff, a reporter from the *New Yorker*, requested an interview with the Durrs. They agreed to talk to the reporter, but off the record, as they did not want any more negative publicity surrounding their family. Virginia spoke frankly to Henthoff about the family's isolation in Montgomery and its inability to make a living. Joseph and Alice Winters, the Durrs' pseudonyms, also criticized the lack of white leadership in Montgomery, especially among local clergy.⁹³⁰ Virginia told Henthoff, "the Southern liberal, if that

⁹²⁸ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 300-301; Clifford J. Durr to Dr. John A. V. Davies, 6 May [sic] 1961, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 5; "C.J. Durr Owned Car Mob Burned," c. June 1961, newspaper clipping, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8; Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 251; Carson, *In Struggle*, 36; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 192.

⁹²⁹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 37.

⁹³⁰ Nat Henthoff, "Our Far-Flung Correspondents: A Conversation in Alabama," *The New Yorker*, 16 July 1960, 42-54.

word has any meaning left, is the most isolated minority in the South. . . .We have no one. We can't belong to the white community or to the Negro's."⁹³¹ Unknown to Virginia and Cliff, Henthoff published the article in *The New Yorker*. Despite the false names, the story left little doubt as to the real identity of Mr. and Mrs. Winters. The Durrs received numerous threatening and harassing phone calls, and even the Durrs' few friends expressed their anger and betrayal.⁹³² Virginia promptly wrote Henthoff, claiming that his actions were "rather typical of the Northern hit and run 'liberal' who comes South for a few days. . . .Northern 'liberals' like yourself . . .do not hesitate to sacrifice individuals to a 'cause' and in their own interest."⁹³³ As the 1960s progressed, Virginia became increasingly frustrated with 'Northern liberals' who professed to know all about the South's wrongs, but were unwilling to stay in the region to fix them.

Harassing phone calls, sometimes as many as fourteen a day, typified just some of the threats that the Durrs endured. The FBI surveillance continued, hampering Cliff's ability to sit on the Alabama Commission of Civil Rights or to seek a job in government, as he could not obtain FBI clearance. Cliff consistently sought the aid of people in Washington to get it stopped, but the FBI continued their reports on Cliff until 1964.⁹³⁴ Virginia remained under surveillance until 1968, when the FBI deemed that she was no longer "in a position to exercise any degree of influence of [sic] others against the

⁹³¹ Ibid., 50.

⁹³² Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 312-314; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 29 August 1960, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 133.

⁹³³ Virginia Durr to Nat Henthoff, 20 July 1960, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 6.

⁹³⁴ Henthoff, "A Conversation," 42; Lucy Durr-Hackney, interview with author; Virginia Durr to Ava Helen, 23 July 1963, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 291-292; SAC, Mobile, to Director, FBI, 31 December 1964, CJD, FBI files. Cliff hoped that Johnson would obtain a position for him as a federal judge, but realistically knew he would never be confirmed because of the FBI surveillance. (see Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 199-200).

national interest.”⁹³⁵ Nevertheless, their local reputation led to a real estate agent’s refusal to rent the Durrs a house because he feared the neighbors would protest.⁹³⁶ In a more open form of attack, Virginia’s name appeared in a local newspaper article as the white woman who helped Dr. King. The article claimed Virginia helped make King a “national figure.”⁹³⁷ The writer then connected Durr, with her Communist influence, to Justice Black and emphasized that Virginia’s husband offered opinions to local and national media which “broadcast Red propoganda and race-mix propoganda.”⁹³⁸ At times the harassment frightened Virginia, and she dreaded for Cliff to leave on his many speaking trips during the 1960s for fear of reprisal.⁹³⁹

Despite the local persecution, Virginia remained optimistic about the direction of the civil rights struggle during the early 1960s. The younger generation began taking the lead, and Virginia admired their determination: “the Negroes have simply reached the (that is the young veterans particularly) where they had just as soon be dead as segregated. . . something has to give and I am very much afraid violence will be the answer.”⁹⁴⁰ Certainly, Virginia witnessed numerous cases of violence in Montgomery. Along with the beating of the freedom riders, Virginia detailed white violence and obscenities leveled at blacks as they attended marches and meetings. Whites poured lye on an African-American woman as she waited for the bus. Yet, there were slow changes. By 1964, the Durrs reported that things had settled down in Montgomery—the movies,

⁹³⁵ “Memorandum,” 17 December 1968, VFD, FBI files.

⁹³⁶ Wayne Morse to Clifford Durr, 12 April 1961, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 6; Virginia Durr to Elizabeth and Hugo [Black], 22 February 1965, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 7; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi Foreman, 26 July 1961, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 134.

⁹³⁷ “What About This Alabama White Woman? Who Helps Martin Luther King?”, newspaper clipping, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 10.

⁹³⁸ Ibid.

⁹³⁹ Henthoff, “A Conversation,” 42; Virginia Durr to Mairi Foreman, 13 July 1964, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 136.

⁹⁴⁰ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 7 March 1960, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 133.

the lunch counters, hotels, and restaurants were desegregated with little incident.⁹⁴¹ The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which Virginia hailed as a “political miracle,” finally gave the rights of African Americans the backing of the federal government.⁹⁴²

The peaceful period was short-lived, however. Even before the wave of college youths descended on the South in 1964, the Durrs’ home became a safe haven for young civil rights activists. Bob Zellner became a frequent guest and close friend, and student radical Tom Hayden slept on their floor in 1961.⁹⁴³ The Durrs’ home was “like a station on the underground railroad.”⁹⁴⁴ With the pressure for a voting rights act in 1965, the Durrs’ home overflowed with workers from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Founded in 1960, SNCC offered a vehicle for activism for the younger generation of civil rights workers. By 1964, SNCC turned its attention to voting rights in the South, organizing registration drives in both Alabama and Mississippi. Many northern SNCC workers came South during the summer of 1964 to help in a massive voter registration drive which came to be known as Freedom Summer. Virginia, sympathetic to their cause, offered her home as a shelter for many activists, and it remained so until the 1970s. Virginia did not allow the activists to stay for free, however, and put them to work emptying the trash and washing dishes while she cooked and washed their clothes.⁹⁴⁵ She admired their courage and their hope but felt that

⁹⁴¹ Ibid (Durr to Foreman, 3/7); Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 11 July 1962, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 135; Clifford Durr to Aubrey [Williams], 17 July 1964, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 9; Clifford Durr to ‘Cousin Lucy,’ 30 July 1964, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 9.

⁹⁴² Durr, as quoted in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 234.

⁹⁴³ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 7 March 1963, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 135; Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 30 November 1961, box 2, folder 135; VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 134.

⁹⁴⁴ Lucy Durr Hackney, interview with author.

⁹⁴⁵ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 8 January 1964, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 136; Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 28 July 1964, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 9; Durr, *Outside the*

the trouble is that they all leave, no one ever stays, they all come and then go and leave us here and leave the Negroes here. I do wish that sometimes someone would stay and battle here. We are like New York, they like to visit but don't want to live here.⁹⁴⁶

Still, their presence brought Virginia back into the fight, although locals chastised Virginia for allowing a bunch of “hippies” stay with them.⁹⁴⁷ The planned march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, Alabama, brought even more activists to the Durrs' home, and they spent most of their time washing, cooking, transporting, discussing, and arguing “with visitors of every type and description and political persuasion.”⁹⁴⁸

Having obtained the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many civil rights organizations turned their attention to voting rights, an area which had been the focus of SNCC since the early 1960s. In 1965, King announced a plan for a voter registration campaign in Alabama. Alabama, with the exception of Mississippi, had the lowest number of registered blacks in the South. To protest the political inequality and continued subjugation and violence against blacks in the South, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference announced a march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery in the Spring of 1965. While the Durrs did not participate in the march (Virginia was now sixty-five years old), the beatings on the Edmund Pettis Bridge brought national attention to the violence in the South. The following week President Johnson denounced the actions of the state troopers and openly supported voting rights for African Americans.

Magic Circle, 322-323; Virginia Durr to Aubrey and Anita [Williams], 13 July 1964, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 310-311.

⁹⁴⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 18 March 1965, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 136.

⁹⁴⁷ Virginia Durr, interview with Marie Jemison.

⁹⁴⁸ Clifford Durr to Clark Foreman, 30 March 1965, CJD Papers, box 4, folder 1.

Immediately after the march, white activist Viola Liuzzo was shot to death while transporting marchers from Montgomery back to Selma. Cliff wrote his daughter, “perhaps the blood of Mrs. Liuzzo will gain us a temporary remission of violence, but I don’t think we can rely on its saving powers for our redemption.”⁹⁴⁹

Deeply troubled over Mrs. Liuzzo’s murder, and boldly facing the armed Ku Klux Klansmen who stood outside the courthouse, Virginia attended the trial of the four men arrested for the crime.⁹⁵⁰ She chronicled the events of the trial in an article, “Economics and a Murder Trial,” published in *New South*.⁹⁵¹ In the article, Durr argues that more than simple racism, or the defense of white Southern womanhood, prompted the murder of Liuzzo. Instead, it was the pitiful place which poor whites occupied in the South. The accused men, Durr noted, were unemployed steel workers. She wrote,

Many southern white men have been brutalized and oppressed themselves and given nothing to comfort their souls but that ‘they were better than niggers.’ They feed their souls on it and when that support is removed, they must face the fact that they are nothing but ‘poor, white trash’ with no one to look down upon, but rather looked down on from above with the same kind of contempt and disgust they show Negroes.⁹⁵²

While Virginia deplored the murder and the farce of justice, which initially failed to convict the men, she lessened her criticism of the “poor white trash” in the article, trying to make sense of a senseless murder and a violent system of racism. According to

⁹⁴⁹ Clifford Durr to Ann and Walt [Lyon], 1 April 1965, CJD Papers, box 4, folder 1; see also Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

⁹⁵⁰ Virginia Durr to C. Vann Woodward, May 1965, MJP Papers, box 1, folder 15.1.33.

⁹⁵¹ Virginia wrote under a pseudonym, Eliza Heard, undoubtedly to avoid more negative local attention.

⁹⁵² Eliza Heard [Virginia Foster Durr], “Economics and a Murder Trial,” *New South* (October 1965): 6.

Virginia, the root of the violence was not color, nor interracial sex, but the fear of economic competition and loss of social standing among poor whites. Yet, Virginia thought that the ‘ruling families’ of the South needed to take responsibility for the behavior of poor Southern whites, as she told Clark Foreman in 1960:

I think we have raised up a breed of real Nazis down here. I think it is the fault of your people and mine, the slave owners and the “good families” who looked down on and snooted the poor whites almost as much as they looked down on the Negroes, and you know it’s true. “Poor white trash” was as much a word of scorn as “Nigger” and almost more so.⁹⁵³

Despite her dislike of poor, white, racist, Southerners, she began to accept that the very society she loved was also the society that created them. Paternalism, as Durr discovered, had lasting effects, and she sought a permanent solution.

By the 1960s, Virginia firmly declared herself a “Marxist.”⁹⁵⁴ Although economic inequality had occupied some of her social criticism throughout the New Deal era, her economic thought had developed into some kind of philosophy by the civil rights movement. While she felt that Socialism proved to be a more just system than capitalism, it had not produced a more loving, peaceful society. As she had in the 1930s and 1940s, Virginia continued to criticize the Communist Party but remained indignant about ‘red-baiting’ by seemingly liberal organizations. For Durr, the civil rights movement had to encompass more than a struggle against racism; it also involved a struggle against the economic system and its injustices. White racism, Durr concluded,

⁹⁵³ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 6 December 1960, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 133.

⁹⁵⁴ Virginia Durr to Max Geismar, 21 December 1962, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 281.

was the product of an economic system that exploited both poor whites as well as African Americans. Although Virginia proposed no concrete solutions, economic inequality, she concluded, was the root of all racism, exploitation, and oppression in the United States.⁹⁵⁵ For Durr, until people could afford to live freely, freedom had little meaning.

Virginia's letters of the 1960s also reveal her frustration with northern liberals and their attempts to 'fix' the South. She desired that northern liberals realize that "the Southern struggle affects them too," and that the "Damned Yankees" should start living up to their rhetoric and push for justice in the South.⁹⁵⁶ Yet, by 1965, she felt that the South had become "glamorous" to northern liberals, as they came to the region to provide guidance while ignoring problems among northern urban blacks.⁹⁵⁷ In a 1965 interview with friend Studs Terkel, Virginia admonished,

I don't think you've done a very good job in Chicago. I think the South Side of Chicago is as near an approach to hell as I've ever seen. . . . We've got our problems in the South. And we may fail, and we may succeed. . . . But what are you all going to do? . . . Are you going to let it get so bad they're going to burn the place down? What are you going to do? It's your problem! . . . You can't come South to solve it. You've got to solve it right here.⁹⁵⁸

Once again, Virginia spoke to Terkel, not as an 'outsider,' but as a Southerner, who, despite the region's problems, took pride in her heritage. She wrote in 1967, "I want to keep my pride as a Southerner, although I must confess it is often hard. . . . I take so much

⁹⁵⁵ Ibid.; Virginia Durr to Marge Franz, 7 January 1963, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 283-284; Virginia Durr to Otto Nathan, 7 October 1968, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 407-408.

⁹⁵⁶ Virginia Durr to C. Vann Woodward, 25 February 1963, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 285-286.

⁹⁵⁷ Virginia Durr to Jessica "Dec" Mitford, 21 June 1965, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 334-335.

⁹⁵⁸ Virginia Durr, interview with Studs Terkel, reprinted in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 235-236.

personal pride in being Southern.”⁹⁵⁹ Although she advocated the support of the federal government, Virginia continued to maintain, throughout the civil rights era, that it was Southerners who could best solve the racial problems of the South.

While the civil rights struggle captured national attention, Virginia was also concerned about the prevailing political scene of the 1960s. Still a staunch Democrat, Virginia did not support the 1960s Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy. She hoped that Lyndon Johnson would be chosen as the Democratic candidate, and she told Johnson in 1959, “We WILL NOT VOTE FOR KENNEDY, we are old fashioned and prejudiced Protestants and won’t have a Catholic President if we can help it.”⁹⁶⁰ Despite her championship of racial tolerance, Virginia did not like Catholics or the Catholic Church and feared that the Vatican was trying to control the public schools. She found the political situation in Alabama ironic, and she claimed most of the moderate Democrats supported Johnson and all of the segregationists wanted Kennedy. Kennedy’s commitment to escalating the Cold War also frightened Virginia. Although Durr did not trust Kennedy, she found Richard Nixon almost repulsive. The Red Scare was too fresh in her memory to forget or forgive Nixon for his role in the Alger Hiss case and his pandering to anti-communist fears.⁹⁶¹ She regarded Nixon as “a dangerous and evil man.”⁹⁶² Durr maintained her faith in the Democratic Party. According to Patricia Sullivan, “[the Democratic Party] was, for [Durr], a continuation of Franklin Roosevelt’s

⁹⁵⁹ Virginia Durr to Glenn and Vann [Woodward], 19 June 1967, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 387-388.

⁹⁶⁰ Virginia Durr to Lyndon Johnson, 12 March 1959, Selected Names, box 17, LBJ Library.

⁹⁶¹ Durr, interview with Marie Jemison; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 19 January 1960, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 132; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], Summer 1960, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 133; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 13 February 1961, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 134; Virginia Durr [“Jinksie”] to Elizabeth and Hugo Black, 20 June 1960, CJD Papers, box 5, folder 8; Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, 21 October 1960, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 225-226.

⁹⁶² Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 27 November 1957, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 180.

effort to democratize the South and liberalize the Democratic Party.”⁹⁶³ Johnson looked to Franklin Roosevelt as his model and, with the Great Society, fully intended to continue the reform program of the New Deal era. Yet, the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson and subsequent war in Vietnam proved to be, according to Allen Matusow, the ‘unraveling’ of American liberalism, defining its limits in the context of the Cold War political culture.⁹⁶⁴

The year 1963 proved to be a pivotal year for the Civil Rights Movement in the South. In June, President Kennedy announced in a televised speech his proposal for a comprehensive civil rights bill. That same night Byron de la Beckwith shot and killed civil rights worker Medgar Evers in his driveway. Violence in the South continued with the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham which killed four African-American children. While Birmingham Sheriff “Bull” Connor ordered police dogs and water hoses turned on peaceful black marchers, George Wallace ran again, successfully this time, for governor of the state. In his inaugural address, Wallace promised Alabamans, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!” The year culminated with the assassination of President Kennedy on a campaign stop in Dallas, Texas.

Although Durr did not like Kennedy, she found his assassination to be a sign of the desperate state of the nation. Even more disturbing than the death of the President, however, was the reaction of Alabama whites. Upon word of JFK’s death, Virginia recalled hearing cheers of “Hooray for Dallas” from local high school students, while

⁹⁶³ Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 233.

⁹⁶⁴ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 278; See Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

men in bars toasted the death of the President. Convinced that Johnson would get Congress to pass the Civil Rights Bill, Virginia showed optimism about Johnson's presidency at first.⁹⁶⁵ When Johnson was elected in 1964, the Durrs attended the inaugural party. Virginia thanked the First Lady for the invitation and remarked, "more than the fun I had was the sense of pride and honor you and Lyndon gave me for being a Southerner."⁹⁶⁶ Durr's admiration for Johnson undertook a major change, however, when Johnson escalated American presence in Vietnam.

Although hopeful about national politics in 1964, Virginia watched with disgust as George Wallace began to rise to increasing prominence in the South. Promising to defy federal intervention in the South and return the region to 'traditional' American values, George Wallace dominated Alabama politics throughout the 1960s. According to Dan Carter, George Wallace, "more than any other political leader of his generation" helped spawn the new conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s by compounding "racial fear, anticommunism, cultural nostalgia, and traditional right-winged economics into a movement that laid the foundation for the conservative counterrevolution."⁹⁶⁷ Elected to four gubernatorial terms in Alabama, Wallace also had presidential aspirations, which he sought to fulfill twice in the 1960s and twice in the 1970s. Promising to uphold segregation and attempting to bar physically the first black student from attending the University of Alabama 1963, Wallace became the champion and savior of many white reactionaries in the state.

⁹⁶⁵ Virginia Durr ["Jinksie"] to Hugo Black, 26 November 1963, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 7; Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, 10 April 1964, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 113.

⁹⁶⁶ Virginia Durr to Lady Bird Johnson, 7 February 1965, White House Social Files, Alpha File, "Durr, Mrs. Clifford J.," LBJ Papers, box 701.

⁹⁶⁷ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 12.

Wallace's reign in Alabama threatened to split the Democratic Party between loyalists and Wallace supporters in 1964. In the 1964 campaign, Wallace competed strongly with Barry Goldwater for Southern support. Virginia joined forces with other anti-Wallace Southerners to try and form a new Democratic group that could challenge Wallace's reign, but they watched as five Republicans, all staunch supporters of Goldwater, gained seats in Alabama.⁹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Wallace once again won the governorship in 1964, and Virginia watched helplessly as Alabama whites succumbed to the ravings of the "little bantam rooster."⁹⁶⁹

In 1964, the Durrs escaped Alabama's tumultuous political scene momentarily with a trip to Great Britain. Since the early 1960s, the Durrs served as hosts for Commonwealth Scholars from Britain, many of whom desired to see the South and the activism of civil rights workers. The Harkness Fellow scholars stayed in the Durrs' home, and, consequently, the Durrs established close relationships with many of them. In 1964, Anthony Lester, a scholar who stayed with the Durrs in the early 1960s, managed to get Cliff an invitation to lecture on civil rights and civil liberties at the University of London, Oxford University, and Cambridge University.⁹⁷⁰ The trip was Virginia's first time to England and she "adored" it.⁹⁷¹ She told Corliss and Helen Lamont, "I have not felt so popular for years and years and I adored having the phone ringing all the time and being asked out."⁹⁷² Even more refreshing was her ability to speak her mind without

⁹⁶⁸ Virginia Durr to Jessica "Dec" Mitford, 13 November 1964, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 316-317.

⁹⁶⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi {Foreman}, 7 May 1964, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 307-308.

⁹⁷⁰ Virginia Durr to 'Robins,' 20 January 1964, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 7; Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 301; Salmund, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 193.

⁹⁷¹ Virginia Durr to Corliss and Helen Lamont, 25 March 1964, VFD Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 181.

⁹⁷² *Ibid* (Lamonts).

reprisal, and she, naturally, marveled at the constant “good manners” of the British people.⁹⁷³

When they returned home, Cliff began the process of liquidating his law practice. Offers for speaking engagements began to trickle in, and Virginia felt the time had come to “get rid of the free legal aid bureau we have run.”⁹⁷⁴ The Durrs spent most weekends at the Pea Level, a farm north of Montgomery County that had belonged to Cliff’s grandfather. Cliff was devoted to the farm and determined to make it inhabitable. Virginia supported Cliff’s desire to live in the isolation of the Pea Level, although she never loved it the way Cliff did. In 1968, the Durrs sold their apartment in Montgomery and took up residence permanently at the farm near Wetumpka. Although isolated from Montgomery, Virginia began to feel at home at the Pea Level and to enjoy the peace of the country.⁹⁷⁵

By the mid-1960s, Virginia began to have doubts about the “movement” that began to engulf the nation’s youth. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for black equality, student activists returned home after the summer of 1964 prepared to fight for their own freedom and rights. Free speech, minority rights, economic justice, women’s liberation, and the war in Vietnam galvanized the 1960s generation to fight for a more just society.⁹⁷⁶ Although Virginia supported the young activists in the civil rights movement, the militancy of the 1960s generation began to give her doubts to its effectiveness and goals. According to historian C. Vann Woodward

⁹⁷³ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁴ Virginia Durr [“Jinksie”] to Hugo and Elizabeth Black, 12 October 1964, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 7.

⁹⁷⁵ Clifford Durr to Aubrey Williams, 26 May 1964, CJD Papers, box 3, folder 9; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], December 18 1968, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 138; Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, 18 December 1968, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 411-412; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 196, 204-205.

⁹⁷⁶ For a well-written and detailed overview on the 1960s “movement” see Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

“retirement age” for activists was “about twenty-six,” and the older generation was regarded as “not *with* it.”⁹⁷⁷ Although past middle age, the Durrs still had two young children who were part of the new generation. Virginia kept close contact with the new, young leaders of the Southern Conference Education Fund, Anne and Carl Braden, who came under anti-communist attack by 1961.⁹⁷⁸ Virginia considered Anne, whose upbringing was similar to Durr’s, a close friend, and gave Anne her highest compliment, that of “a LADY.”⁹⁷⁹ Housing young people during the civil rights era also kept the Durrs in contact with numerous young people. During the early 1960s, Virginia admired the youth’s commitment to civil rights, as well as their determination and bravery, and she gladly relinquished the leadership to their hands.⁹⁸⁰ Yet, by the mid-1960s the young generation began to move in other directions and to come under the influence of the emerging counter-culture.

While Virginia struggled to understand the goals of the student radicals, she could not offer acceptance to their methods of obtaining them. Although she was never prudish about sex, the changing sexual mores of the 1960s often shocked Virginia. She believed that sexual promiscuity brought only “sorrow,” and that sexual freedom was “not the answer” to women’s oppression.⁹⁸¹ It was an argument that many feminists began to echo by the late 1960s. The relationship between Jessica Mitford’s daughter, “Dinky-donk,” and James Foreman deeply troubled Virginia. It was not the interracial

⁹⁷⁷ Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, 170.

⁹⁷⁸ Woods, *Black Struggle*, 140. See also Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*.

⁹⁷⁹ Durr to Foreman, 13 August 1959. Anne Braden considered Virginia a lifelong friend and mentor. For more on Braden, see Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

⁹⁸⁰ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 3 December 1961, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 134.

⁹⁸¹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 14 November 1963, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 135.

relationship that was the source of concern, but that “the Donk” became pregnant, and she and Foreman did not marry. Virginia believed that Foreman, a leader of SNCC during its increasingly radical period, could not afford politically to marry a white woman.⁹⁸² Furthermore, the “bad manners” of youth angered Virginia, along with the hedonism and self-indulgence in which many of the young activists engaged. Virginia felt that the younger generation had no concept of the past struggles for civil rights or freedom, nor did they want to know.⁹⁸³

Even more than the changing sexual attitudes of the younger generation, their lack of direction disturbed Virginia. In 1970, she wrote to the Foremans explaining,

What makes me have so little faith in the student movement or the hippies or whatever you want to call them is their incompetence. They can't do anything, they can't make the machinery run and yet they take it entirely for granted. . . and think when the Revolution comes they can still eat out of the Safeway. I think their protests against the War has been wonderful and I love them for it, and in fact in many cases I love them, but I certainly do not trust them to bring about any real change. . . .I simply cannot see them becoming our liberators at all.⁹⁸⁴

She felt that the younger generation was also hypocritical in its approach, in that it wanted to “wage a ‘Revolution’” and simultaneously “call on the U.S. Government to

⁹⁸² Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), 144-148; Virginia Durr to the Foremans, 25 October 1968, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 138.

⁹⁸³ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 3 November 1969, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 139. Virginia's reflections on the youth rebellion of the 1960s also focused on the youth's lack of hygiene, foul language, and drug use.

⁹⁸⁴ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 7 November 1970, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 139.

protect them while they are waging it.”⁹⁸⁵ The only area that Virginia felt the student movement was affecting was the Vietnam War. By the mid-1960s, Durr adamantly opposed the war and considered herself “no longer a Lyndonite.”⁹⁸⁶ A long-time member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Virginia opposed the war in Vietnam as strongly, if not more so, than she did the war in Korea.

If the 1960s youth culture troubled Virginia, the black separatist movement infuriated her. As SNCC’s rhetoric and tactics became more radical by the mid-1960s, the Civil Rights Movement began to split, with the younger generation eschewing the tactics and methods of the NAACP and the SCLC. Feeling that it mirrored the split among the labor of the 1930s Virginia lamented the split of the Movement.⁹⁸⁷ As with the youth movement, Virginia became angry that younger African Americans did not recognize or appreciate the work and struggles of the older generation. In a letter to the Foremans, she wrote, “I don’t go for the hate Whitey bit either. I have not spent the best part of my life fighting racial hatred to forgive it when it is turned against me.”⁹⁸⁸ By 1966, Virginia felt herself on the “right wing” of the Civil Rights Movement, “lined up with the old folks like Charles Gomillion and Ed Nixon.”⁹⁸⁹ When Virginia and Cliff attended the eleventh anniversary celebration of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the black community welcomed them heartily.⁹⁹⁰ Yet, her work during the 1930s and 1940s appeared to be forgotten. Dating the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s was,

⁹⁸⁵ Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, 12 October 1965, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 343.

⁹⁸⁶ Virginia Durr to Robins, 28 October 1965, VFD Papers, box 1, folder 7.

⁹⁸⁷ Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, 29 March 1965, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 322-323.

⁹⁸⁸ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 25 October 1966, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 137.

⁹⁸⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi, 7 April 1966, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 137.

⁹⁹⁰ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi, 5 December 1966, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 137.

according to Virginia, “historically so inaccurate.”⁹⁹¹ She became increasingly tired of being treated like a “living relic” and having her generation’s fight against fascism trivialized.⁹⁹²

Virginia also had a falling out with Anne Braden over Anne’s support of black separatism and, what Virginia felt was, Braden’s unwillingness to acknowledge the work of the older generation of civil rights activists.⁹⁹³ In 1965, Braden published an overview of the civil rights struggle covering the 1955-1965 period. Although Braden did mention the work of the preceding decades, Virginia felt slighted by Braden’s evaluation. Although initially angry with Anne, the rift did not last long; yet, the generational differences between herself and Braden often mirrored the generational split within the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.⁹⁹⁴

Virginia also took extreme offense to the racial slurs against whites made by the more militant black activists. In response to an article in the *Patriot*, the newsletter of the SCEF, Virginia wrote,

I must say that I think the *Patriot* has for too long and far too much accepted the view by blacks that “whitey” is the enemy and get rid of “whitey” all will be well. The concept of Black Power is perfectly soundbut to equate Black Power with the whole concept of “Hate Whitey” and “Kill Whitey” leads to nothing but massacre of the Blacks. I have lived too long with the idea of hatred of Blacks to be willing to accept

⁹⁹¹ Virginia Durr to Jim Dombrowski, 10 September 1965, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 113.

⁹⁹² Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, 21 September 1965, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 340-343.

⁹⁹³ Ibid (Durr to Dombrowski).

⁹⁹⁴ Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 339; Virginia Durr to Anne Braden, 26 October 1965, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 346-347.

the hatred of whites as a valid principle.⁹⁹⁵

Although the editor of the *Patriot* disagreed that it promoted racism against whites, the editor did charge that the paper had the highest respect for Virginia Durr, “one of the most courageous and faithful battlers for human rights the South ever produced.”⁹⁹⁶

The urban riots of the mid-1960s helped solidify Virginia’s feelings that the younger generation of activists was taking the wrong route to salvation. Starting in 1965, riots engulfed many of the nation’s urban ghettos, with some of the largest death tolls and destruction in northern cities like Detroit and Chicago. The riots were, to Virginia, “inevitable” but “suicidal.”⁹⁹⁷ In a letter to the Foremans, Virginia claimed,

I think that in spite of being Southerners, we like and admire and EXPECT more of Negroes than these Yankees do. I simply do not look on them as the humiliated, degraded, hopeless people that the Northern liberals seem to think they are, I have known too many that I admired and though had great strength of character and resolution and I do not see them as they are so often portrayed, as degraded beyond belief.⁹⁹⁸

Virginia never ceased to believe that, as a Southerner, she could much better understand the mind and desires of African Americans and that it was one of her duties to help them achieve their goals.

The assassination of Martin Luther King in April of 1968 marked a turning point for the Civil Rights Movement, in what historian Clayborne Carson termed the period of

⁹⁹⁵ Virginia Durr, “An Economic Struggle,” ca. 1960s, newspaper clipping, VFD Papers, box 4, folder 7.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 15 August 1967, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 138.

⁹⁹⁸ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi, 7 March 1968, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 138.

“falling apart.”⁹⁹⁹ Virginia, too, felt that King’s assassination was a “watershed” event.¹⁰⁰⁰ With the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, African Americans witnessed the end of legalized segregation and disfranchisement. Yet, the country remained far from peaceful and the movement splintered beyond repair by the late 1960s. The continued war in Vietnam polarized society and, despite Virginia’s hesitations about student radicals, she championed their fight and their protests against the war.

Like many young people, Durr began to view Lyndon Johnson as the enemy of liberalism and the harbinger of death and destruction. Virginia’s feelings towards Johnson, as well as Lady Bird, with whom Virginia had a long-time correspondence, took a complete turn by 1965. A Democrat all her life, she began to hope for a Republican victory in order to end the war. Johnson became a “kind of horror” to Virginia and she felt that “he and Bird are like some evil kinds of mirror figures, nothing but an image and such a bad one, and all the time they are preaching love, beauty, Christianity, and equality, the napalm is falling.”¹⁰⁰¹ The Vietnam War overshadowed the passage of the civil rights legislation in Virginia’s estimation of Johnson. Showing her self-declared Southern snobbery, Virginia even began to offer personal attacks on Johnson: “I always knew Lyndon had a kind of cheap quality, what we used to call the ‘Drugstore Cowboy’ type, but I never in my wildest dreams would have thought he was so evil and blind and brutal.”¹⁰⁰² The war in Vietnam moved Johnson out of the realm of respectability for

⁹⁹⁹ See Carson, *In Struggle*.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Virginia Durr to Jessica “Dec” Mitford, 7 May 1968, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 397.

¹⁰⁰¹ Virginia Durr to Mairi and Clark [Foreman], 21 November 1966, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 137.

¹⁰⁰² Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 11 July 1966, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 137.

Virginia; no longer did she regard him as a part of the ruling class of Southerners, but as an “unrefined,” lower class, “syrup sopper.”¹⁰⁰³

Much of Virginia’s struggle with the Democratic Party in Alabama centered on preventing George Wallace from achieving his presidential aspirations. In 1968, Wallace ran for President on the American Independent Party ticket, which was, “in realty, only Wallace.”¹⁰⁰⁴ Wallace’s support came not only from the white South, but also from ethnic, working-class neighborhoods in northern and mid-western cities.¹⁰⁰⁵ Virginia watched as whites in Alabama clamored to support Wallace whom, she felt, “is their God, it is really frightening to see how they adore him. . . .he is their spokesman for whatever hunger and deep frustrations they have.”¹⁰⁰⁶ To rally opposition to George Wallace, Virginia sought to build greater African-American political participation in the state.

By the time of the 1968 Democratic convention, Virginia supported Eugene McCarthy for a presidential bid despite his past record of voting against abolishing the poll tax.¹⁰⁰⁷ McCarthy, who “resembled a monk from a secluded seminary more than a bare-knuckled fighter in the public lion pit of American politics,” began to gain the support of the growing anti-war movement by arguing that the war in Vietnam was hurting American democracy.¹⁰⁰⁸ Virginia became a member of the National Democratic

¹⁰⁰³ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 18 November 1966, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 365-368. Virginia’s use of the term “syrup sopper” refers to a crowd of Southern whites she saw at a syrup sopping contest, an event she found to be completely uncultivated or refined and characteristic of uneducated Southern whites.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Walter LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005) 138.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Virginia Durr to Otto Nathan, 11 March 1968, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 395.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, *Eugene McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 158.

¹⁰⁰⁸ LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 36, 38-39.

Party of Alabama and decided to attend the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that summer. Although the delegates failed to get seated at the convention, her involvement with the convention pushed Virginia back into the political fight.¹⁰⁰⁹ The protestors outside the convention impressed Virginia. Although the “Hippies and Yuppies” once again seemed ridiculous to her, the “Clean for Gene” students “renewed” her faith and hope in American politics.¹⁰¹⁰

During the late 1960s and early 1970, trying to redeem the Party and wrest power from Wallace, Virginia remained involved in state politics and supported the National Democratic Party of Alabama. She appeared before the McGovern Commission to testify to the inadequacies of voter education by the Democratic Party and its inability to make the Democratic Party of Alabama follow Party lines, an event which was televised on CBS.¹⁰¹¹ Her activism in Democratic Party politics continued during the early 1970s. She ran for the Democratic County Committee and helped organize an interracial group of Democratic women. She supported George McGovern for the presidency in 1972 and served as a McGovern delegate at the Convention. Yet, she watched as Nixon capitalized on the “Silent Majority” who voted him into office that year, an event on which she refused to even comment.¹⁰¹² Virginia always believed in politics and the political

¹⁰⁰⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 25 September 1968, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 138; Elizabeth Black to Virginia Durr [“Jinksie”], 1 October 1968, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 8.

¹⁰¹⁰ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, 29 September 1968, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 181.

¹⁰¹¹ Durr to Nathan, 7 October 1968; “Statement of Virginia Foster Durr Before the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection of the Democratic National Committee,” 22 May 1969, MJ Papers, box 1, folder 15.1.14.

¹⁰¹² Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 419; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], n.d. [1972], VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 140; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 2 December 1972, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 140.

system, and the fight to expand democracy and political participation characterized most of her social activism during her life.

Although Virginia was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement and an interested observer of the student radicalism of the decade, she did not take an active part in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s. Nevertheless, she found the activism of women working for freedom inspirational.¹⁰¹³ With the formation of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1960, many American women began to decry their own social and economic injustices in the country. Yet, by the late 1960s, the women's movement grew as divided in tactics and objectives as the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, Virginia felt that the women's movement could aid the situation of Southern women "whose lives have been so starved and twisted by the kind of life they have had to lead."¹⁰¹⁴ As with the poll tax in the 1930s, Virginia felt hopeful that Southern women would take their place in the political arena. In 1964, her main concern was that Southern women who were "just coming into political life" could be a "force for good if they are organized and taught something about politics, most of them are political illiterates, but if they are left to Wallace and Goldwater they become instruments of hate."¹⁰¹⁵ During the 1960s and 1970s, Virginia remained involved in a number of women's groups, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the United Churchwomen.

Yet, as with the civil rights activists, Virginia disagreed with many of the younger female activists. She told many young women that being responsible for the family income in addition to raising children and having a marriage put too much of a burden on

¹⁰¹³Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 333.

¹⁰¹⁴ Virginia Durr to Anne Braden, Spring 1960, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 202.

¹⁰¹⁵ Virginia Durr to Jessica "Dec" Mitford, 24 April 1967, in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 384-386; Virginia Durr to Lady Bird Johnson, 16 July 1964, White House Social Files, Alpha File, "Durr, Mrs. Clifford J.," LBJ Papers.

women and left men with no responsibilities. Durr also felt that the weakness of the mainstream women's liberation movement was its failure to address a change in the economic system.¹⁰¹⁶ In 1976, Virginia offered her views on women's rights:

I never felt that men were the oppressors. I don't believe that oppression comes from sex or race or anything but the kind of system we live in. . . .one reason I am anxious for women to get their rights is that I have a belief that women have more care for life than men. I think things like women going into the fields of teaching and nursing have brought about in them a great degree of wanting to see people live.¹⁰¹⁷

Durr did not view the Equal Rights Amendment as a solution to the more pressing problems of violence and poverty.¹⁰¹⁸

At other times, Virginia failed to take women's liberation seriously. She felt that many of the radical activists denounced those who did not agree with them, especially women who wanted to marry and have families.¹⁰¹⁹ She believed that female activists did not seek her for support, and she told Clark and Mairi Foreman in 1969 that a women's liberation group did not ask her to speak again because

I told them the first thing to do to get liberated was to get a man to be liberated from. I thought this was cute, but these lank-haired, messy girls took offense, at least some of them did. But so silly to talk about being liberated from men when they deliberately make themselves look so awful, how can they ever get one, they seem to think men should love

¹⁰¹⁶ Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 333.

¹⁰¹⁷ "Work for Reform In World."

¹⁰¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁹ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 30 November 1970, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 139.

them in spite of looking like rag bags.¹⁰²⁰

Clearly, women's liberation failed to appeal to Durr primarily due to the lack of 'ladylike' behavior and dress among its supporters. Nevertheless, future generations of women activists credited Durr for paving the way for their fight.¹⁰²¹

By the late 1960s, Cliff spent much time engaged in public speaking, and Virginia often traveled with him.¹⁰²² Clark Foreman and Corliss Lamont both pressured Virginia to publish a book about her life. Work on *The Emancipation of Pure, White Southern Womanhood*, as Virginia planned to title it, began in 1971 with a contract through Doubleday.¹⁰²³ Virginia planned on ending her memoirs with the death of Roosevelt. She considered the decade of the 1930s as "the most vivid and happiest and rewarding part" of her life.¹⁰²⁴ Durr did not get past the first four chapters because a house fire in 1975 destroyed her manuscript. She never resumed work on it.¹⁰²⁵

In 1972, the Durrs' financial troubles came to an end when the Durr Drug Company went public. Cliff sold half of his stock and made a profit of \$350,000. The remainder of the money, after they paid taxes and invested, allowed the Durrs to travel

¹⁰²⁰ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 10 April 1969, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 139.

¹⁰²¹ For example, see Constance Curry, et. al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

¹⁰²² In 1967, Cliff returned to England to lecture and in 1966 he spent time as a visiting professor at the University of California in Los Angeles.

¹⁰²³ Clark Foreman to Corliss Lamont, 26 April 1968, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 138; Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi [Foreman], 30 August 1971, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 140.

¹⁰²⁴ Virginia Durr, quoted in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 418.

¹⁰²⁵ Clark Foreman to Virginia Durr, 8 December 1975, VFD Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 142. Cliff also had a contract with Houghton Mifflin to write his autobiography but, like Virginia, never completed work on it. (Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 203).

more during the early 1970s. They often visited their numerous grandchildren, and in 1973, they returned to England and Scotland for leisure.¹⁰²⁶

By the early 1970s, physical problems began to slow down their activities. While Virginia had suffered from a stomach hernia since the early 1960s, Cliff's health became a greater cause for concern. Since the mid-1960s, Cliff's various ailments required hospitalization at times. Cliff continued to have back problems and endured an infected prostate in 1972. In May of 1975, Cliff began to have heart problems again, and doctors diagnosed him with a pulmonary embolism. Given his various heart and back troubles, the family was not alarmed and assumed he would again recover. He died unexpectedly on May 12, only a year away from the Durrs' fiftieth wedding anniversary.¹⁰²⁷ When Cliff died, Virginia lost her best friend and supporter. She told one of her daughters, "No one is going to set my limits anymore."¹⁰²⁸

¹⁰²⁶ Virginia Durr to Clark and Mairi Foreman, 21 June 1972, VFD Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 140; Virginia Durr to Helen and Corliss Lamont, 30 August 1973, VFD Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 182; Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, ca. 1972, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 140.

¹⁰²⁷ Virginia Durr to Clark Foreman, 27 September 1962, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 135; Salmond, *Conscience of a Lawyer*, 210-211; "Clifford Durr" obituary, 13 May 1975, *New York Times*, 38.

¹⁰²⁸ Virginia Durr, quoted in Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 419.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION: THE MASK AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

In 1986, Virginia Durr told a reporter for the *New York Times*, “all white people in the South are born into sin.”¹⁰²⁹ Durr’s redemption comprised a lifelong work. Despite Virginia’s despondency over losing Cliff, she did not retire from public life after 1975. She returned to Montgomery a year later to be close to her friends and to be nearer a center of social activism.¹⁰³⁰ While the direct action phase of the Civil Rights Movement concluded by the mid-1970s, equality had yet to be achieved. As late as 1983, Durr felt that the South had “desegregation, not integration.”¹⁰³¹

Much of Virginia’s activism in her later years involved speaking engagements and conferences. In 1976, Durr presided over a session at the Hugo Black Symposium at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. The conference, opened by historian Anne Firor Scott, focused on the position of women in Southern society. Durr’s presence signified the link that many women felt she provided between the women activists of the 1930s and 1940s and contemporary Feminists. Virginia also participated in other symposiums and conferences, such as the New Deal Symposium at the University of Texas and the national “Trailblazers and Torchbearers: Women in the Civil Rights

¹⁰²⁹ Diane McWhorter, “Old Montgomery Foes Gather to Recall Roles in ’56 Boycott,” *New York Times*, 9 February 1986, 36.

¹⁰³⁰ Lucy Durr Hackney, interview with author.

¹⁰³¹ Michael Sznajderman, “Southern Radical,” *The Alabama Journal*, August 1983, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 6.

Movement, 1941-1965,” Conference, held at the King Center at Georgia State University in 1988. Other organizations, such as the Tuskegee Civic Association, the Nathan Mayhew Seminars series, and the University of South Alabama-Baldwin County, pressed Virginia for speaking engagements during the 1980s. Virginia also spoke at a tribute for slain civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo.¹⁰³²

The recognition Durr had so long desired was finally being lavished on her by the 1980s. Before Cliff’s death, the Columbia Oral History Project interviewed both of the Durrs. Although honored by the request, Virginia told Corliss Lamont, “Cliff and I have become historical relics . . . we were right, but we had to pay the penalty of being right too soon.”¹⁰³³ After the publication of her autobiography in 1985, Durr’s activism gained national recognition, including an appearance on the *Today Show*. Reporters began writing articles about the Southern “belle” who became a radical for civil rights, and universities and organizations gave Durr degrees and honors. Wellesley College presented Durr with the Alumnae Achievement Award in 1983. Emory University granted Virginia an honorary doctor of laws degree, and Mt. Holyoke College bestowed honorary doctors of humane letters on both Durr and Rosa Parks.¹⁰³⁴ Even the Alabama

¹⁰³² “Sessions Look at Women in South,” *The Birmingham News*, 26 March 1976, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 73; Amy Jo Long to Virginia Durr, 21 January 1983, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 73; Coretta Scott King to Virginia Durr, 8 September 1987, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 175; Marymal Dryden to Virginia Durr, 23 June 1988, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 73; Della D. Sullins to Virginia Durr, 21 February 1984, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 73; Thomas R. Goethals to Virginia Durr, 26 December 1985, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 73; Phillip E. Norris to Virginia Durr, 20 October 1986, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 73; “Tribute to Viola Liuzzo,” VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1, folder 73.

¹⁰³³ Virginia Durr to Corliss Lamont, n.d. [1974], VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 182.

¹⁰³⁴ Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 421; Elizabeth Mehren, “A Southern Belle who Battled Racism,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1986, VFD Papers, box 2, folder 8; “Depression Opened Eyes of Civil Rights Activist Virginia Foster Durr,” n.d. [c. 1985] newspaper clipping, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 7; “Virginia Foster Durr: Profile of a True Southern Rebel,” n.d. [c. 1985], newspaper clipping, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 7; “Things Have Changed, Just Ask Crusader,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 14 October 1985, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 7; Katherine Strehle to Virginia Durr, 14 January 1983, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 1,

State Senate honored Virginia Durr with a resolution that honored her “courage to speak and act on behalf of those shackled by fanatical bigotry.”¹⁰³⁵ Undoubtedly, Durr recognized the irony.

Despite the awards and honors, Virginia remained troubled by the prevailing political scene and remained actively involved in political and social concerns. In 1978, she joined a group of Democrats who fought against the death penalty. She continued to worry about nuclear war and was frustrated with the Reagan administration’s cuts in social welfare programs and increased military spending. During her speaking engagements, she constantly tried to rally young people to action as she felt that they had become complaisant and ignorant of current affairs.¹⁰³⁶ She encouraged people to “get out in the world and do something. . . .the only two ways to settle things are politics and war. When politics fail, you have war.”¹⁰³⁷ Yet, Durr recognized the limitation her age made on her activities and charged the youth of America that “there’s still a lot more to do. You young people have got to do it, though.”¹⁰³⁸

After Cliff’s death, Virginia also took time to travel and spend with her family. In the late 1970s, she took a trip to China with Myles Horton and some of the Highlander staff. She also traveled to Greece and went to England on several occasions. She spent her summers in Martha’s Vineyard with her daughter Lucy and her numerous grandchildren. The Hackney’s home in the Vineyard was the setting of Virginia’s

folder 73; “Durr Receives Honorary Degree from Emory,” 14 May 1987, *Emory News*, VFD Papers, box 2, folder 8; “Mrs. Durr, Mrs. Parks Honored,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 25 May 1981, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 226; President of Mt. Holyoke College to Virginia Durr, 24 May 1981, VFD Papers, box 4, folder 5.

¹⁰³⁵ “Beech, Durr cited by Alabama Senate,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 9 April 1986, 6B, VFD Papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹⁰³⁶ Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 420-422; Corliss Lamont to Virginia Durr, 20 March 1985, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 183.

¹⁰³⁷ “Work for Reform”.

¹⁰³⁸ “Whites Also Fought for Freedom,” CJD Papers, box 54, folder 18.

eightieth birthday party in 1983. The “pink party,” named in celebration of Virginia’s political views, received public recognition in newspapers. Attendees included columnist Art Buchwald, writer William Styron, Rev. Francis B. Sayre Jr.—dean of the Washington Cathedral--and television journalist Mike Wallace. A few years later William Styron published a short write-up of Virginia Durr for *Esquire* magazine’s “The Women We Love: A Definitive Selection.” He included Durr’s short biography alongside other notable women of the decade such as journalist Diane Sawyer, actresses Joan Collins and Diane Keaton, and First Lady Barbara Bush.¹⁰³⁹

By the late 1990s, Virginia’s health began to fail. She suffered from dementia and moved permanently to Pennsylvania to be closer to her daughters and to have continuous care at a nearby nursing home. Virginia died on February 24, 1999, at the age of ninety-five. In her hometown of Montgomery, the flag over the state capitol was lowered to half-mast.¹⁰⁴⁰ President Bill Clinton honored Durr in a press statement and Rosa Parks told Durr’s family, “I will miss you, old soldier, but the rich legacy you have passed to your children, grandchildren, and great-grands lives on.”¹⁰⁴¹

Due to the public recognition Durr received towards the end of her life, as well as her much publicized autobiography, Virginia Foster Durr will be remembered as a Southern belle who eschewed her upbringing to fight for racial justice in the South. As apt a description as that is, it is too simplistic. To understand fully how Southern women

¹⁰³⁹ Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 420; Corliss Lamont to Virginia Durr, 16 January 1980, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 3, folder 183; Mairi Foreman to Virginia Durr, 11 March 1980, VFD Papers, Schlesinger Library, box 2, folder 146; Sznajderman, “Southern Radical”; Charlotte Curtis, “A Pink Party at the Vineyard,” 2 August 1983, *New York Times*; “Celebrities Hail Alabama’s Virginia Durr,” [1983], *Montgomery Advertiser*, newspaper clipping, VFD Papers, box 3, folder 7; William Styron, “Virginia Foster Durr,” *Esquire* (June 1987).

¹⁰⁴⁰ Lucy Durr Hackney, interview with author; Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 422.

¹⁰⁴¹ “Virginia F. Durr, 95, Advocate of Civil Rights in the Deep South,” obituary, *New York Times*, 25 February 1999.

like Durr operated for social change, scholars have to delve fully into these women's construction of themselves and how they presented themselves to a society that fought against them. Virginia Durr consistently wore the mask of the Southern lady at various times during her years of activism. It was an identity that provided her respect, protection, and acceptance while she simultaneously engaged in activities that often caused her social ostracism. Durr struggled between wanting to belong to her chosen society--that of the white ruling elite--and wanting to fight for rights of African Americans. Her vacillation between the two extremes caused her much turmoil, but it also allowed her to traverse the boundaries of Southern womanhood.

Despite the title of her autobiography, *Outside the Magic Circle*, Durr was no outsider. She was a Southerner and remained loyal to and defensive of her region until her death. As sociologist Gunnar Myrdal recognized in 1944, "the Southern liberal, having to be critical of the South, has to emphasize strongly his *local and regional patriotism*."¹⁰⁴² Regardless of how infuriated Virginia became with Southern whites, she never failed to align herself with leading members of Alabama society. She retained her white paternalism throughout the 1930s and into the 1970s. She felt strongly that the South was *her* region, and, as a true Southerner, it required activists like she to save it.

If Durr rejected the racial mores of the white South, she did not abandon the role of the Southern lady. Virginia Durr acutely recognized the need to maintain the face of respectability in the realm of controversial activism. She therefore presented herself as a proper Southern lady until the end. In 1983, she told a reporter, "I try to be a Southern

¹⁰⁴² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 471.

lady, but I'm afraid I won't be if I express what I feel about Ronald Reagan."¹⁰⁴³

Fighting racism and sexism demanded too much of a stand, even for a strong woman like Durr. In order to make herself heard, she abided by the dictates of Southern womanhood, even if she operated outside of their realm at times. Being a Southern lady provided Durr with the protection of white Southern male society. Even in the face of a direct affront by James Eastland, Durr was not harmed, for Southern men protected their ladies. Unlike black women in the South, who were not considered 'ladies,' and, therefore, not entitled to white male protection, Durr and other white female activists before the 1960s did not face violence and physical abuse because of their activism. Although Durr struggled with social ostracism and mild harassment, her physical safety was rarely in question.

Durr's life demonstrates yet another issue that must be examined when autobiography tells the struggles of the past. Published in 1985, *Outside the Magic Circle* provides a reflection on Durr's life. When the tale ends with a positive resolution, past trials are often mitigated in the larger context. Durr failed to remember all of the struggles she endured because of her stand. She told a reporter on her eightieth birthday that her family "protected her" and that "there was little overt hostility" towards the Durrs during the civil rights years.¹⁰⁴⁴ Certainly her letters from that period fail to reflect the memory she had in later years. Durr's activities led to a lot of personal turmoil for herself and her family. While Durr found a strong community of Southern reformers in Washington D.C., returning to Alabama left her isolated from a community that did not approve of her activities during the New Deal era.

¹⁰⁴³ Sznajderman, "Southern Radical."

¹⁰⁴⁴ Ibid.

Durr's autobiography also allows for a fluid self-construction that altered as she grew older. Durr's conversion to racial 'enlightenment' began, not when she was forced to eat lunch with a black girl at Wellesley, but when she began to work for the Women's Division of the Democratic Party in Washington D.C. There, by establishing friendships with educated African-American women such as Mary McLeod Bethune Durr realized that black women could be, and were, 'ladies' too. That realization marked her transformation to a race liberal. Being a 'lady' epitomized a benchmark of respectability that Durr used throughout her life. When Virginia Durr realized that a circle of 'ladies' committed to change operated in the nation's capital, she jumped into the political arena. Her social and personal identity with these women in the New Deal political climate gave her the power and the drive to demand change. The inclusion of African-American women in this women's network impacted Durr's views of race and the South.

To understand Southern women and their work for social justice in the South, scholars must not be quick to dismiss the power of the Southern 'lady.' No doubt numerous Southern women worked for reform, although not always in the realm of race relations. Hidden under the guise of respectability and femininity these women influenced necessary changes. Uncovering the veneer of Southern womanhood illuminates how Southern women operated in a region dominated by patriarchy and segregation. Virginia Durr's manipulation of her identity and use of it as a powerful tool for social change indicates what a determined and valiant woman she truly was.

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**Oklahoma State University
Institutional Review Board**

Protocol Expires: 10/16/2004

Date: Friday, October 17, 2003

IRB Application No AS0411

Proposal Title: VIRGINA FOSTER DURR: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN THE SEGREGATED
SOUTH

Principal
Investigator(s):

Stefanie Decker
1508 Timothy
Amarillo, TX 79118

Laura Belmonte
501 LSW
Stillwater, OK 74078

Reviewed and
Processed as: Expedited

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

Dear PI :

Your IRB application referenced above has been approved for one calendar year. Please make note of the expiration date indicated above. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact me in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, colson@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Carol Olson, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Stefanie Lee Decker

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE MASK OF THE SOUTHERN LADY: VIRGINIA FOSTER DURR,
SOUTHERN WOMANHOOD, AND REFORM

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Odessa, Texas, on April 5, 1973, the daughter of Pat and Sharon Gilliam. Married Jonathan Decker on June 6, 1998. Mother to Adam Decker, born October, 2002.

Education: Graduated from Texas Christian University, Ft. Worth, Texas, in December 1994 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and History. Received Master of Arts degree in History from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, in May 1998. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in History at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2007.

Experience: Employed as a graduate assistant at Oklahoma State University's History department from 1996-1998 and from 1999-2002. Taught U.S. History at Oklahoma State in the Spring of 2002. Employed as a History instructor at Amarillo College, Amarillo, Texas, from 2004-2007. Taught U.S. History and English at Lake Dallas High School, Lake Dallas, Texas, 1998-1999.

Professional Memberships: Phi Alpha Theta, Southern Association for Women Historians, East Texas Historical Association, Texas State Historical Association.

Name: Stefanie Decker

Date of Degree: December, 2007

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: THE MASK OF THE SOUTHERN LADY: VIRGINIA FOSTER DURR, SOUTHERN WOMANHOOD, AND REFORM

Pages in Study: 281

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: History

Scope and Method of Study: This study examines the life and reform efforts of Virginia Foster Durr. Her reform work spans the years of the Great Depression into the era of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Durr's story has been compiled from a variety of sources, such as personal interviews, archive collections, newspapers, articles, and secondary sources.

Findings and Conclusions: Virginia Foster Durr was able to manipulate her identity as a Southern lady to work for controversial changes in race relations in the Deep South. At various times during her life, Durr assumed different identities, which allowed her to work on the political front during the 1930s and into the 1960s. Durr was involved in various organizations, such as the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax (NCAPT), the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), and she also became highly involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. Due to her visible position within the SCHW and the NCAPT, Durr became a target of Communist accusations during the early 1950s. Durr's rich life and activism demonstrates how women operated for change despite strict social and cultural regulations that often disapproved of women's political participation.

Advisor's Approval _____ Dr. Laura Belmonte _____