

Is it Possible to Escape the Past? Race and the Radicalization of Robert Byrd and Anders Breivik

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CHRISTOPHER KEITH JOHNSON, JAN 26 2021

On the surface, Robert Byrd and Anders Breivik could not have been more different. The former was a distinguished United States Senator from West Virginia who was once considered among the most powerful politicians in America. The latter was a Norwegian terrorist who in 2011 killed 77 of his fellow citizens in what was both that nation's worst act of domestic terrorism and perhaps the largest loss of life taken in a spree killing in modern European history. What unites these two men, raised in different countries, in different eras, was their belief in white supremacy and a fear of racial change. In the case of Byrd, civil rights were once his chosen target. For Breivik it was immigration reform. This essay will explore how each was radicalized, as well as what led to their disengagement, and deradicalization. It is worth noting that all three stages did not apply to both.

Robert Byrd was at the time of his death in 2010, the longest serving senator in American history. Born in North Carolina, he was raised in West Virginia following the death of his mother. Her dying wish was that he be given by his father to her relatives – the Byrd family of West Virginia. In his early adult years, the American South was segregated. African Americans were excluded from the right to vote and at best were second class citizens throughout the South and much of America. But this was rapidly changing as they successfully organized a civil rights movement to benefit from the same constitutional rights enjoyed by White Americans. Byrd joined the domestic terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), to counter the growing racial justice movement in America. In fact, his activism in the KKK not only preceded his successful runs for political office but formed a blueprint for how he would engage issues to secure support from voters. After recruiting 150 members into a local KKK branch which he founded, Byrd was appointed its chapter head – Exalted Cyclops.

Anders Breivik was raised by an abusive single mother after the divorce of his parents. In his early childhood, child psychologists recommended that he be taken from his mother. That recommendation was never followed up on, leaving Breivik subject to abuse for the entirety of his upbringing. Breivik was affiliated with the youth wing of the far-right, anti-immigrant Progress Party, and led one of its local chapters for a time. He left the party after a few years and began to focus on becoming proficient with small arms. Unable to pursue his passion into a career in the Norwegian army, Breivik instead received paramilitary training in Belarus. Before his deadly terrorist attacks, he had become a loner but remained plugged into the far right through the internet.

Byrd was a leader in the KKK during a decline in its influence. There is no evidence that he presided over a militant chapter. Researchers claim that it was unlikely that his local unit went beyond holding discussions regarding racial purity. There is no recorded history of his chapter melding theory to praxis in the form of violence against African Americans, Jews, or Catholics. The KKK tradition of hosting a parade for visibility was not even done in his chapter. (Palmer 2010). Whether he joined the Klan to help his election chances in a racist area of the country as is claimed by former US President Bill Clinton, or he believed it to be the proper agent for a regressive political movement is debatable (Zimmerman 2010). These early years in the political life of Byrd are little more than a footnote in his written history. But the sentiments espoused during this brief association exposed a racial hatred that was common among southern Whites of the time and incredibly impactful in the lives and life chances of African Americans. In opposition to the desegregation of the US armed forces after the Second World War, Byrd expressed the following:

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Byrd said in the Dec. 11, 1945, letter — which would not become public for 42 more years with the publication of a book on blacks in the military during World War II by author Graham Smith — that he would never fight in the armed forces “with a Negro by my side.” Byrd added that, “Rather I should die a thousand times, and see old Glory trampled in the dirt never to rise again, than to see this beloved land of ours become degraded by race mongrels” (Pianin 2005).

His were clearly articulated, racist beliefs that would have had him betray his country rather than follow its likely turn towards desegregation in one of its oldest and most respected institutions – the US military. Only a few years away from becoming a sitting US congressman, it is hard to believe that these strongly held views would easily disappear through one election win.

Anders Breivik terrorist attacks in Oslo were driven by anti-immigrant sentiment as well as a desire for his country to return to what many on the far right believed to be traditional values. His target selection was driven by his belief that the current cultural order in Norway was too politically correct, too tolerant, too feminist, too eastern European, and pluralist. All the above in his mind were a threat to Western values. While not blatantly racialized as Byrd’s, his beliefs were at minimum subtler versions of the Nazi and Confederate white supremacist dogmas of old. The 1500-page manifesto that he published online before the attacks captures his beliefs. An analysis of his document is provided below:

The explanation given for the attack on the postmodern value system is that it is said to weaken Europe with its deconstruction of the European Christian identity and its emphasis on multiculturalism and feminism, as opposed to nationalism and patriarchy. In Breivik’s view, the cultural Marxism of Eastern Europe has successfully infiltrated and weakened the Western European identity. (Billing and Stalne 2011, pp. 152).

The cultural shift illustrated in Breivik’s manifesto left his country vulnerable to attack not only by religious and ethnic minorities but perhaps an even greater threat – an erosion of traditional values. In his mind the above amounted to an existential crisis for a *European Norway*. This was for him an emergency that required swift and decisive action. This long-term reformist *attack* on traditional values therefore required a *defense*. The need to defend one’s culture has been a justification globally for the commission of terrorist acts. Breivik uses it here as well.

Byrd and Breivik were first introduced to radical ideas in their youth. The difference being that these ideas were more wedded to mainstream notions of white supremacy in Byrd’s case while Breivik’s source of exposure would have been considered extremist. The American South during the first half of the 20th Century, while undergoing transformation due to the Civil Rights struggle led by African Americans, was still a place of white resistance to a change in the racial hierarchy. America, especially its South, was segregated by race, had limited opportunities for African Americans, and was comfortable with a separate and unequal reality in its race relations. Norway during Breivik’s upbringing, while having pockets of white resistance to multiculturalism was quickly moving towards at least a surface level embrace of those ideals including immigration reform. While both places where Byrd and Breivik adopted their racist beliefs were undergoing progressive change, Norway in the 21st Century was far ahead of post-World War Two West Virginia in that forward movement towards reform.

Byrd’s ideas were encouraged by those in spaces of political power. He was rewarded for white supremacist beliefs by seeking, campaigning for, and winning political office in West Virginia. Former US president Bill Clinton in the passage mentioned at the beginning of this essay even surmises that the more extreme Byrd’s beliefs, the greater the chance of his political future during the time of his first election into public office. Byrd’s political career was nurtured by his membership in a terrorist organization, but he was able to either hide, adapt, or evolve in his belief system over time.

Breivik on the other hand was most closely allied with a small band of radicals. Even when a member of the Progress Party, Norway’s third largest, his beliefs were not mainstream. In contrast to Byrd, he did not achieve notoriety or any major recognition whatsoever in the larger community. At the time that his beliefs were transformed to the kinetic, he was a loner having achieved little in his adult life. He gained his fame from the terrorist act itself.

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Byrd disengaged from his association with terrorism due to his elevation to elected political office. Although a vocal racist during the early years of his tenure in American politics, his association with the Ku Klux Klan seemed to have ended as soon as he took office. His views on race took longer to transform. He voted against major civil rights legislation during the height of that transformative movement. Later, perhaps out of a desire to be considered for leadership positions in a more left leaning Democratic Party, Byrd became more open to supporting progressive legislation. One of his last acts in an exceptionally long career, was his endorsement of Senator Barack Obama as his party's candidate for the US presidency in 2008. By the time of his death, Byrd by most accounts would have been considered deradicalized, evidenced by the tone of his public persona, his more recent voting record, and his public statements.

Breivik by contrast was disengaged through capture by authorities following the bombing of public buildings and the mass murder of the attendees of the Workers Youth League summer camp in Utoya. There has been nothing before, during, or after his trial which would indicate that his far-right views have changed in any meaningful way. Since the event, if not in Norway, his belief system, while not widely popular, has gained traction in the political trends in Europe as evidenced by the backlash against the refugees from the Middle East and Africa that have sought sanctuary in Europe in their millions since the attacks in Norway.

Can it be proven that Byrd died a reformed man with ideas in drastic opposition to those he once held and that are currently held by Breivik? It cannot be proven. Perhaps what could be declared is that Byrd could not *openly* express racist beliefs and expect to be accepted in a political climate that would eventually lead to the election of the first black president in American history. There was likely a political motive for his tamping down of once highly visible racism. Byrd is no more. But the recent uptick in racial violence as seen in the globally publicized extra-judicial killing of black people by police officers in the US, the election of an openly anti-immigrant and racist US president in 2016, and mass protests throughout America in response to what many believe to be systemic racism fuelled by widespread white supremacist ideology perhaps links Breivik and Byrd in ways that at first glance might not be clearly visible.

There is a clear shift right that is evident when a close reading of political reality in America and Europe is conducted. Political contests in Europe over the last decade have seen victory and close races involving far right candidates that are against immigration and support a return of *traditional* European values. The birth rate of people of European descent globally is on the decline. Population growth in most predominately white nations is due to either immigration or higher birth rates amongst its citizens of color. The above feeds white supremacist fear of erasure even if there is no proof that their hold on the economic reality of their respective nations has or would change in any significant way. Power in white spaces remains white. White supremacy will continue to exist without a dramatic shift towards power sharing. The current global moment of reflection on white supremacy means that notions of progress in race relations must also be reassessed.

In conclusion, Byrd and Breivik had many things in common, separation from members of their family at an early life, and exposure to right-wing, regressive politics in adolescence and early adulthood. This is where most would mark a divergence in their paths. Byrd was a mainstream member of society in his late 20s. Breivik on the other hand became increasingly obsessed with planning his attack on his home country and writing of his manifesto – both placing him far outside the bounds of acceptable behavior during the same period in his life. The difference being that Byrd had mainstream, if no less racist, mentors that guided him in early life and young adulthood. Breivik's acts were built largely in solitude with little to no encouragement even from members of the groups in which he belonged. The psychological damage inflicted by his mother as a child perhaps prevented any chance for him to be reached and redirected at a later stage in life. Byrd's mother's wisdom in recommending that he be placed in a loving home upon her death may have saved him from a fate like Breivik.

Breivik is portrayed as a monster. Rightfully so. This is an acceptable assessment as he committed perhaps the greatest single act of mass murder by one individual in recent European history. But to make a comparison, Byrd's congressional record must be scrutinized with the same surgical detail as Breivik's act of terror. How did each vote during Byrd's over six decades in elective office impact the lives and life chances of Americans – especially people of color? As an example, Byrd voted in favor of the 1988 Anti-Drug Abuse Act and the Violent Crime Control and Law

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Enforcement Act of 1994 (United States Senate 1989; United States Senate 1993). These laws led to the rapid militarization of American policing which resulted in millions of black people being incarcerated or in some instances murdered by police (Price & Payton 2017; De Soto 2018; Rushin 2016; Cox & Cunningham 2017). These laws have had a negative impact on the lives of the poor and people of color in the United States even after the death of Byrd in 2010.

One could question who is more the danger – a “reformed” former Ku Klux Klan Exalted Cyclops who was twice positioned as the third most powerful elected official in America or a lone spree killer who is incarcerated in a maximum-security prison with little to no chance of ever being released? The overt, kinetic, grotesque violence of Breivik by his own hand is perhaps more abhorrent in public opinion than the negotiated, systemic, institutional violence of the state through public policy endorsed by Byrd (Jakobsson & Blom 2014).

The violence of the Ku Klux Klan fuelled white supremacist beliefs that were being challenged by a growing racial justice movement. The energy transmitted through its violence was enough to propel Robert Byrd into a circle of power at a level that few American politicians will ever attain. Once in that circle it was for Byrd to decide how his ideology could best be reflected. Breivik’s violent acts were a challenge to the establishment. His was a complete rejection of that order. It was harsher than that of the Progress Party in which he was once an active member. It was a repudiation of the entire system including all political parties in Norway. The lessons in both cases involve early intervention and injection of a willingness to negotiate contested space as a means towards deradicalization. But can a terrorist be negotiated with? In the case of Byrd and Breivik it is a matter of whether that terrorist can compromise their own established values. This is more an internal rather than an external exercise.

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