

Eugene Talmadge and the New Deal

ARTICLE ONE

President Franklin Roosevelt's greatest political rival in the state of Georgia was Eugene Talmadge, a powerful, colorful, and controversial figure in Georgia politics from 1926-1946. Talmadge served three times as the commissioner of agriculture and three times as governor. Farmers backed Talmadge passionately, and he fought for farmer's issues throughout his entire career. Talmadge believed in low taxes and limited government, and he became a bitter opponent of increased government under FDR's "New Deal."

As governor, Talmadge resisted efforts to give more civil rights to African-Americans. As a result, UGA lost its accreditation when Talmadge forced the University to dismiss two faculty members who favored integrating the school.

Though many Georgians, especially farmers, loved Talmadge, his opposition to the New Deal and to civil rights created negative publicity for the state. In 1936, the pro-Talmadge forces suffered defeat when the pro-"New Deal" E.D. Rivers was elected Governor of Georgia. In 1936, governors could not serve consecutive terms, so Talmadge was not eligible to run for office against pro-New Deal E.D. Rivers who became the new governor of Georgia.

Despite the election of Rivers, the popularity of Talmadge remained high, and many considered him a potential candidate to run for President against FDR. For decades, Georgia's Democratic Party was divided between big-government Democrats who supported the New Deal and the small-government, pro-farmer Democrats who supported Talmadge.

Eugene Talmadge and the Three Governors Controversy

ARTICLE TWO

November 17, 1948 - Atlanta

It was one of the most bizarre political episodes in American history. For a brief period of time in 1947, Georgia had three governors.

Eugene Talmadge won election to a fourth term as Georgia's governor in 1946, but died before his inauguration. To fill the vacancy, Eugene's son, Herman, was appointed by the state Legislature. But the anti-Talmadge Melvin Thompson had been elected to the newly created office of lieutenant governor, and he claimed to be governor as well.

With no clear winner, outgoing governor, Ellis Arnall—also anti-Talmadge due to Talmadge's pro-rural and white supremacy beliefs--refused to vacate the office. Fistfights broke out, and after the legislature chose Herman Talmadge, he ordered state troopers to remove Arnall from the governor's office.

At one point, both men occupied the governor's suite and Herman changed the locks. With tensions mounting, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that Thompson was acting governor until a special election was held in September 1948, which Talmadge won easily. The controversy solidified the Talmadge dynasty in Georgia when Herman was sworn in as governor on November 17, 1948,

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ARTICLE THREE

Georgia's "three governors controversy" of 1946-47, which began with the death of governor-elect Eugene Talmadge, was one of the more bizarre political spectacles in the annals of American politics. In the wake of Talmadge's death, his supporters proposed a plan that allowed the Georgia legislature to elect a governor in January 1947. When the General Assembly elected Talmadge's son Herman Talmadge as governor, the newly elected lieutenant governor, Melvin E. Thompson, claimed the office of governor, and the outgoing governor, Ellis Arnall, refused to leave office. Eventually, the Georgia Supreme Court settled the controversy.

Background

In the summer of 1946 Eugene Talmadge won the Democratic primary for governor for the fourth time. His election was assured because the Republican Party in Georgia was not viable and had no nominee. However, Talmadge was not healthy, and his close friends began to fear that he would not live until the November general election or would die before his inauguration in January 1947.

Eugene Talmadge served as governor of Georgia from 1933 to 1937 and again from 1941 to 1943. His tenure included the controversial Cocking affair in 1941, and his death in 1946 touched off the unprecedented "three governors controversy."

Eugene Talmadge

After a great deal of legal research, Talmadge's followers found dubious constitutional and statutory precedence for the state legislature's electing a governor if the governor-elect died before taking office. According to their findings, the General Assembly could choose between the second- and third-place vote-getters from the general election. Because no Republican candidate would be running, the Talmadge forces reasoned that a write-in candidate with enough votes statewide would be second or third behind Talmadge, and the General Assembly could choose that candidate if the situation warranted. The Talmadge stalwarts therefore chose to run Talmadge's son, Herman, as a secret write-in candidate.

There was one problem with this plan: the new state constitution created the office of lieutenant governor, which would be filled for the first time in the 1946 election. The lieutenant governor would become chief executive if the governor died in office. The constitution was not clear about whether the lieutenant governor-elect would succeed if the governor-elect died before he took the oath of office. Melvin E. Thompson, a member of the anti-Talmadge camp, was elected lieutenant governor in 1946. Naturally, the Talmadge forces were not eager for Thompson to become the next governor.

Two Claimants

Eugene Talmadge died in late December 1946. When the General Assembly convened in January 1947, the immediate order of business was to fill the vacant governorship.

Herman Talmadge, son of Georgia governor Eugene Talmadge, took the governor's office briefly in 1947, and again after a special election in 1948.

Herman Talmadge

The Talmadge forces wanted the legislature to elect Herman Talmadge, while Thompson's allies lobbied the legislature to declare Thompson the governor. According to the state constitution, election results were not official until certified by the General Assembly. Thompson wanted the General Assembly to certify the returns so that, as the official lieutenant governor-elect, he would have a stronger claim to the governorship. Talmadge forces, however, won a close vote to delay certifying the vote and to move immediately to select a new governor. On January 15, 1947, the General Assembly elected Herman Talmadge as governor. Meanwhile, Thompson began legal proceedings to appeal to the Georgia Supreme Court.

The Third Claimant

As the legislature was electing Herman Talmadge governor and Thompson was preparing a court fight to dispute Talmadge's election, the outgoing governor, Ellis Arnall, announced that he would not relinquish the office until it was clear who the new governor was. Arnall's actions galvanized Talmadge's supporters, who bitterly hated his anti-Talmadge policies. The legislature's election of Talmadge provoked a confrontation between the Talmadge and Arnall camps. Although the two politicians maintained their decorum, fistfights broke out among their followers.

Talmadge asked Arnall to honor the General Assembly's election. Arnall maintained that the legislature had no right to elect a governor and refused to step aside. Talmadge then ordered state troopers to remove Arnall from the capitol and see that he returned home safely. On January 15, the day of the legislative election, both Herman Talmadge and Ellis Arnall claimed to be governor of Georgia and shared the same offices in the capitol. By the next day Talmadge had seized control of the governor's office and had the locks on the doors changed. Arnall continued to maintain his position as governor and even set up a governor's office in exile in an information kiosk in the capitol. Ultimately, Arnall relinquished his claim as governor and supported Thompson.

An Anticlimactic Ending

After Arnall surrendered his claim to the governorship, Georgia was still left with two governors, each of whom had appointed government officials. The result was two months of chaos.

In March 1947 the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that Melvin E. Thompson was the rightful governor because he was lieutenant governor–elect when Eugene Talmadge died. In a five-to-two decision the justices ruled that Thompson would be the acting governor until a special election could be held to decide the remainder of the original term, which would have run from 1947 to 1951. Within two hours of the court decision, Herman Talmadge left the governor's office. His apparent capitulation surprised many who thought that he might challenge the ruling. Almost immediately he began campaigning for the special election in September 1948.

In hindsight, the controversy seems almost comical, a relic of an era of Georgia politics that is long dead. At the time, however, it was a source of great embarrassment for business leaders of the state. Georgia's national reputation, already unsavory, took an even further blow.

Herman Talmadge served as governor of Georgia from 1948 to 1954. In 1956 Talmadge was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he served until his defeat in 1980.

Herman Talmadge

Moreover, the episode had several far-reaching consequences. First, it strengthened Herman Talmadge's political reputation. His handling of the court decision earned him a great deal of respect among younger voters and returning World War II (1941-45) veterans. Hard-core Eugene Talmadge supporters, the "wool hat boys," flocked to young Herman because of their perception that the anti-Talmadge forces had stolen the election. The events of 1946-48 also marked the last gasp of the anti-Talmadge faction. After Herman Talmadge's easy victory over Thompson in 1948, no avowed member of that faction ever occupied the governor's office again.

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