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James F. Byrnes' Yalta Rhetoric

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James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt’s “Assistant President for the home front,” was anointed to international politics during the fateful Yalta Conference. Byrnes’ experience prior to Yalta had been primarily as a domestic politician. His participation in the Yalta Conference identified him with matters of state beyond proportion to his actual experience and made him a credible candidate for Secretary of State in the Truman administration. If Yalta was crucial to Byrnes’ political career, it was equally important to the way Roosevelt was perceived during the Cold War years. Byrnes’ reputation and the memory of Franklin Roosevelt were both shaped by the South Carolinian’s public statements about Yalta.

Byrnes’ initial pronouncements on Yalta came just one day after the intentionally terse and ambiguous Yalta communique was issued by the Big Three. Roosevelt, who would not return from Yalta by ship until more than two weeks after the Conference closed, asked Byrnes to fly home first. He authorized Byrnes to hold the first White House press briefing on the Conference, thereby making him its official interpreter. During the hour-long press conference Byrnes reported to the national media interpretations of Yalta which shaped a view of the agreements distorted by incompleteness and inaccuracy. Both during the press briefing and after he became Truman’s Secretary of State, Byrnes contributed to the forging of the myths of Yalta which later fueled the fires of anti-Roosevelt, anti-New Deal sentiment.

An examination of Byrnes’ public portrayal of Yalta immediately after the Conference and later as Secretary of State reveals the extent of public credulity during a time of national crisis, the effective transfer of Byrnes’ credibility to a subject about which he knew little, and Byrnes’ lack of political responsibility. It shows how the complex and interlocked motives of Roosevelt and Byrnes resulted in a contradictory rhetoric which, although initially favorable to Roosevelt’s interest in seeing the accords approved, eventually armed his critics who asserted that the terminally ill, journey-weary President secretly sold out United States interests to Stalin.

In all of this Byrnes’ initial press conference was influential. To an extent, the distortions and omissions in Byrnes’ statements to the press stemmed from Roosevelt’s tactic of keeping him blissfully ignorant of some of the most important agreements, especially those dealing with concessions made to the Soviet Union in the Far East. Since Byrnes left Yalta at Roosevelt's request before the final session in which the Far East was discussed, he was unaware of these agreements. Roosevelt was not, however, solely responsible for the inaccuracies in Byrnes’ story. Byrnes understood clearly that his mission was to act as the President’s representative. No matter how im-
complete his understanding of Yalta may have been, he realized that an optimistic interpretation of the accords would win congressional and public support. Roosevelt simply made it easier for Byrnes to be optimistic. Many of the distortions were clearly Byrnes’ own fault. In the press conference he lent personal interpretations to the Conference communiqué which the events of the Yalta Conference simply do not confirm. Upon becoming Truman’s Secretary of State, Byrnes’ participation in the selling of Yalta constituted a political liability which he shed through false implications of Roosevelt’s secret Yalta diplomacy.

Roosevelt invited Byrnes to attend the Yalta Conference largely because of his political influence with Congress. Byrnes devoted the first portion of his press conference to refuting this very idea, thus conditioning the press to perceive his account as credible. He told the press he had gone to Yalta to render advice on domestic economic matters as the Director of War Mobilization. “All day long,” Byrnes recalled, “I found questions arising, no matter where the conference was held. And whoever represents the government should have someone who knows something about the government generally, or he is at a great disadvantage in a conference with nations who have made government a profession and a career.” Byrnes maintained he had left the conference early for no other reason than that his work was concluded. His interest in appearing to be more than a political functionary merged conveniently with Roosevelt’s interest in having an apparently objective public advocate.

Byrnes’ obvious sensitivity to this issue may also have stemmed from the criticism he received from the Washington Post for leaving his domestic post to join the Yalta mission. In his 1958 autobiography Byrnes made much of the fact that he went to the Conference reluctantly, and only because his staff urged him. Despite Byrnes’ perceptions of his role as an important adviser to the President, it seems unlikely that as a domestic politician he could have played a leading part in a foreign policy conference.

The truth lies elsewhere. Roosevelt’s motive for taking Byrnes was primarily or entirely political. Byrnes enjoyed considerable stature with Congress, the public, and the press. As a former United States Senator, Supreme Court Justice, and current Director of War Mobilization, essentially the “Assistant President for the home front,” Byrnes’ reputation made him an ideal liaison with Congress and a public advocate for Yalta. Not only was Byrnes influential, he was also not perceived as a Roosevelt yes-man. Roosevelt had passed over Byrnes in favor of Truman for his Vice Presidential running-mate, this after Byrnes had resigned his Supreme Court seat to work in the Roosevelt administration. These palpable realities more than Byrnes’ insistence that he was an economic rather than a political adviser helped mightily to establish his ethos as a credible reporter.

By having Byrnes on hand in Washington to explain the Yalta communiqué the day after it was issued, Roosevelt hoped to placate the
American press and Congressional leaders who had complained bitterly of excessive censorship. Even before the Conference began, the *New York Times* had moaned: "Will there be a break from the practices of the past and will we get real explanations from American sources or will we have to wait until Mr. Churchill finds it timely to report to the Commons." Congressional Republicans like Senator Arthur Vandenberg, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, also expressed concern that Roosevelt would not publicly air the Yalta discussions and would, as in the past, circumvent Congress. Vandenberg's publicly acclaimed speech, "The Need for Honest Candor," essentially a plea for Congressional involvement in foreign and public disclosure of future talks, documents the aggravation of many congressmen.

Congress and the American news media had grown wearily accustomed to receiving their information from foreign sources and anticipated with pique that their sole source of information about Yalta would be a closely written communique. Indeed, Roosevelt had determined not to make a full public disclosure of what transpired at Yalta. Roosevelt, fully aware of this sentiment, decided to make Byrnes his advance man. Having Byrnes immediately on the scene would help insure sanguine reporting by the press and a more favorable response from Congress.

By no means, however, did Byrnes anticipate a hostile audience. Neither before Yalta began nor after the communique was issued did Congress or the public express major opposition. Apart from the concern about censorship and lack of Congressional involvement, only the most extreme Roosevelt critics reacted negatively. When the communique was read in Congress it met with protracted cheers. Byrnes cabled Roosevelt: "Communique received with great approval by Congress and Press." A small, but vocal, Republican minority felt differently. The *New Republic* observed: "The American isolationist and protoisolationist press, like the Hearst and Scripps-Howard chains and the *Chicago Tribune* are howling their heads off at the results of the conference, their main [idea] being that Russia won an overwhelming victory over the Western Allies." On the other hand, *Commonweal* exemplifying the viewpoint of the liberal press, said of one of the most controversial agreements: "The settlement of the Polish question, though departing from absolute justice is probably as good a settlement as we could expect."

Byrnes' mission upon returning from Yalta was not, then, to answer major objections to the Yalta accords, but rather to smooth the way for Congressional and public approval, while preempting charges of further administration secrecy. Byrnes also needed to blunt the general concern that in matters of diplomacy the United States was capable of being outfoxed. Before the Conference concluded, James Reston put his finger on the popular fear of being "hornswoggled" at Yalta as America had in previous international meetings. In addition, the public felt uneasy about the possible dominance of Stalin. Russian military victories involving incredible
losses put him in an awesome position to negotiate a favorable agreement. It was for Byrnes to convince the American public that Roosevelt, not Stalin, had dominated the Conference.

Byrnes opened the press conference with characteristic affableness. He joked about Russian vodka, calling it “new corn,” and about the White House conference room which Byrnes saw as “this funeral parlor with Hollywood parentage.” After exchanging pleasantries with the press, Byrnes turned immediately to emphasize the dominant role the President had played at the Conference: “Without any formal vote, but by acquiescence, he was chairman of the conference. He displayed great skill, great tact, great patience, and good humor; and more than once by that tact and good humor he brought about decisions.” Byrnes also pointed out that Roosevelt had proposed the Declaration of Liberated Europe which, he claimed, insured tripartite allied participation in the reestablishment of governments in Greece, Poland, and Yugoslavia. But, as Robert Messer has noted, the original declaration was watered down in the give and take of negotiation and became little more than an agreement to consult.11 Compounding the problem, Byrnes erroneously made it appear that the settlement of the Polish question was representative of the disposition of other liberated countries. The Big Three had agreed to provide for free elections in Poland. Indeed, Roosevelt had tried to establish Poland as a precedent, but ultimately this link was never forged.12

To lend further credence to the claim that Roosevelt had led the Conference, Byrnes heralded the news that he had authored the voting formula to be used in the Security Council of the United Nations Organization. He guarded, however, the formula’s particulars at the request of Harry Hopkins, the President’s adviser, who cabled him the day before.13 One reason for secrecy was simply that China and France had first to be invited as Security Council participants. However, there were other reasons. Although Stalin had been made to agree to the Security Council voting formula, he had prevailed on another sensitive issue. Roosevelt had acquiesced to Stalin’s demand to have two Soviet Republics in addition to the U.S.S.R. represented in the General Assembly. This Byrnes did not reveal. Nor did he admit that the voting formula gave the right of veto to the Great Powers.

Byrnes was remarkably successful in making Roosevelt appear to have held his own at Yalta. The New York Times report of Byrnes’ press conference focused specifically on Roosevelt’s role in shaping what Byrnes presented as two of the major agreements. Less than a week later Newsweek concluded: “The decisions reached [at Yalta] did not reflect any domination of the meeting by the Soviet Premier. . . . And if any of the Big Three might be said to have made more impression on the results than the other two, that man was the President.”14

Among the Yalta agreements discussed in the communique and explained by Byrnes, the settlement of the Polish question caused the greatest
stir in Congress. According to the Yalta communique, the Curzon line would become the boundary between the Soviet Union and Poland, and a new provisional government would be formed from the Polish government exiled in London and the Soviet supported Lublin National Committee. The new government would be committed to holding free elections. Byrnes structured his response to the press interrogation on the Polish question to emphasize the favorable aspects of the compromise: free elections would be held, and the London government would be represented. An editorial in the *New York Times* had referred to the Polish settlement as a compromise. To this charge Byrnes responded that because the Soviets had liberated Poland, a compromise was inevitable, which, indeed, it was. When the press informed Byrnes that the London Poles had refused to accept the settlement, he responded untactfully: "I didn’t read that, but if they did, how many of them are there?" Although risking the irritation of Polish-Americans, this was perhaps the only statement Byrnes made which reflected honestly the tenuous position of the Polish government in exile. Otherwise, Byrnes colored the Polish agreements with an optimism which the Soviet military presence in Poland and her historic interest in having friendly buffer states largely contradicted. The Polish settlement expressed in the communique was little more than an agreement to allow a commission of the Big Three to consult with the Lublin government and the London Poles to determine how the goals were to be accomplished. Since, as Norman Graebner notes, the Americans did not plan to go to war with Russia over Poland, there was no means of assuring what the fate of Poland would be and every reason to believe it would not be favorable to American interests.

In addressing the Polish question and other vital matters raised at Yalta, Byrnes made it difficult for the press to distinguish between personal and official interpretation. While on one hand Byrnes frequently showed his dependence on the language of the Yalta communique, on the other, he also brought a highly idiosyncratic perspective to the accords. The press, for their part, credited Byrnes with a greater understanding of what had occurred than was reasonable. This is not surprising. Byrnes had made his role seem extremely important and Roosevelt had, after all, authorized Byrnes to tell the story first. While Byrnes knew too little about foreign policy or the context of the negotiations to make an accurate statement, the press, hungry for some word of Yalta, invested too much faith in him. Byrnes's contributions to public misunderstanding of the communique rested on emphasis and tone, through which he made the agreements appear far more promising than they actually were. Roosevelt was delighted with the reports of Byrnes' press conference. Still en route from Yalta, he cabled Byrnes: "We are a day out and the trip has been excellent thus far. I think your press conferences have been grand."

Byrnes' part in selling Yalta did not end with a single White House
press conference. On the day the communique was to be released he brought advance copies to a group of Republican and Democratic senators. Later, after the press conference, he met again with influential senators including William Fulbright and Burton Wheeler to discuss the Yalta meeting. He spent nearly two hours recounting its details. Even isolationist Wheeler, reported *Time*, "seemed impressed if not satisfied with what he heard." Within a week of his return from Yalta, Byrnes is said to have spoken with three-fourths of the Senate and a good number of House members. He also narrated a newsreel on the Yalta Conference. In the wake of his rhetorical campaign, columnist Ernest K. Lindley reflected: "He is one of the most persuasive men in Washington." 19

In light of later developments Byrnes' hand in making Yalta platable to Congress and the nation is ironic. Indeed, it posed a political problem for Byrnes. Almost as soon as Byrnes returned home, concern about secret agreements reached at Yalta was expressed by several Republican Congressmen and the *Chicago Tribune*. In February 1945 Byrnes told the press nothing about the Far Eastern agreements. He could not have, since they were concluded after he left. Initially, the Far Eastern agreements were not publicly revealed to guard against Japan's learning of Russia's intention to enter the war against her. But when Roosevelt died, and Byrnes became Truman's Secretary of State, he participated in keeping the agreements secret six months beyond the Japanese surrender on August 14, 1945. They were not made public until February 11, 1946. Byrnes, who knew of the agreements upon becoming Secretary of State, denied knowledge of their existence after there was no military justification for secrecy because the Truman administration did not want to be bound by the Yalta accords. 20

Consequently, in a September 4 press conference, Byrnes refused to discuss the Far Eastern agreements. In August the Soviets demanded cession of the Kurile Islands and South Sakhalin. Reporters asked Byrnes if any agreements on these strategic Pacific islands had been reached at the Potsdam Conference. He replied that the islands had been discussed at Yalta, not Postdam, but when pressed further said: "Well, I don't want to get into that conference. I remember the discussion very well at the time, but I don't want to discuss it now." 21

In the space of just two months Byrnes's memory grew much dimmer. In November Ambassador to China, Patrick Hurley, resigned claiming communist and imperialist influence in the State Department. The next month the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held confidential hearings to investigate Hurley's charges. Byrnes was called to testify on Yalta, since Hurley had not attended. When Senator Styles Bridges asked Byrnes directly if any agreements had been reached at Yalta concerning China, Byrnes could not remember any such agreements, though admitting some agreements may have been reached. 22
The issue of the Far Eastern agreements did not surface again until late January. A publicized disagreement between Dean Acheson and the Soviet Union over the permanence of the Soviet military occupation of the Kuriles led Byrnes to clarify the matter in a January 29 press conference. Responding to reporters’ questions, Byrnes maintained that he did not know of the agreements because he returned from Yalta before they were reached and did not learn of them until after the Japanese surrender in August 1945. In an off-the-record aside Byrnes stroked the press by reminding them that in the September 4 news conference he had frankly admitted to have “learned” of the agreements. In fact, he had said he remembered the discussion of the Kurile Islands from the Yalta Conference. Although this is improbable since he did not attend the final Yalta session at which the Far East was discussed, there is proof that Byrnes knew of the Far Eastern agreements as early as July 3, 1945.23

In an effort to make his claimed ignorance of the agreements more plausible, Byrnes said he had been unable to locate the text in the State Department archives, discovering it finally among Roosevelt’s personal papers at the White House. Thus, he gave the impression that the agreements were ones which Roosevelt had arrived at with Churchill and Stalin secretly, and had kept secret even from the State Department. Byrnes admitted only that the American Chiefs of Staff knew of it. In the late forties and early fifties Roosevelt’s critics would use Byrnes’ rhetorical dodges to document the President’s alleged secret sell-out of American interests at Yalta.24

Of course, this is not to say that Byrnes anticipated how the critics of Roosevelt would use his remarks. Indeed, they interpreted Byrnes freely. Remarkably, one Republican Senator, William Langer, maintained that Roosevelt had entered into the Far Eastern agreements without Byrnes, his Secretary of State, in attendance, forgetting that Stettinius, not Byrnes, had held the post during the Yalta Conference. Although Byrnes’ actual statements were not as damning as Roosevelt critics later remembered, it seems clear that Byrnes had his own interests in mind when he made them.25

In his revealing study of these events Athan Theoharis concludes that Byrnes’ indictment of Roosevelt’s secret diplomacy at Yalta stemmed from a desire to justify both his evasiveness during the Hurley Hearings and the Truman-Byrnes administration’s decision to conceal the Far Eastern agreements. While true, this analysis is not complete. It must be remembered that in February 1945, Byrnes had enthusiastically endorsed the Yalta accords as Roosevelt’s agent. He had gathered Congressional and public support, in his press conference, in private meetings with Congressional leaders, and even in a newsreel. Byrnes’ rhetoric had publicly committed him to support of Yalta. Acting as the President’s emissary had helped establish Byrnes, the domestic politician, as an important figure in foreign policy. He had made the most of the political opportunity Roosevelt
provided by presenting himself as an important and informed Conference participant. In September, despite the Truman administration’s decision to postpone publication of the Far Eastern agreements, he did not want to diminish his importance at Yalta, and therefore claimed to have remembered the discussion of South Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands. Simply to admit in January 1946 that the President had excluded him from the final Conference session in which the Far Eastern agreements were forged would have suggested that Roosevelt had taken him along for political rather than diplomatic reasons. In February 1945, Byrnes had specifically denied this suggestion. It was convenient, then, for Byrnes to imply in January 1946 that Roosevelt had reached some agreements secretly, perhaps even without the State Department’s knowledge. Of course, this justification also served to explain why he did not learn of the agreements until after the Japanese surrender, rather than when he became Secretary of State, and why he had been reticent about them during the Hurley Hearings.

Byrnes’ insistence on having been a prominent delegate at Yalta, whether from pride or political opportunism, and his willingness to play out the role Roosevelt intended for him threatened to damage his credibility. While Byrnes’ evasion on the Far Eastern agreements may have been dictated by foreign policy decisions of the Truman administration, his fear of losing credibility with both the Senate and the public also shaped his rhetoric. In the interests of resolving inconsistencies in his public statements from February through December 1945, Byrnes sold-out Roosevelt as deftly as he had sold Yalta.

As détente fades into a new era of Cold War the clock seems to turn backward. Poland is again a cause célèbre in Eastern Europe and charges of imperialism are hurled across the iron curtain with renewed vigor. In these times it is instructive to remember that the war fought with propaganda rather than bullets had its genesis in misperceptions rather than truths. Jimmy Byrnes contributed to forming these misperceptions. Had Byrnes sold Yalta more realistically, had he revealed the Far Eastern agreements earlier and said nothing to sow the seeds of Republican suspicion of Roosevelt’s Yalta diplomacy there would still have been a Cold War. Nevertheless, an understanding of Byrnes’ role in framing public perceptions of Yalta testifies to the importance of personal motivation in the creation of a rhetoric with far-reaching public consequences.
Notes

4Byrnes, pp. 252–255.
6New York Times, 4 Feb., Sec. 4, p. 3, cols. 7–8.
12Folder 637 (3), TS, pp. 10–16 Byrnes Papers; Clemens, pp. 205–06.
13Cable from Harry Hopkins to James F. Byrnes, 13 Feb. 1945, folder 622, TS, Byrnes Papers.
18Roosevelt to Byrnes, 26 Feb. 1945, folder 622, TS, Byrnes Papers.
21Press and Radio Conference, 4 Sept. 1945, folder 598, TS, pp. 4–5, Byrnes’ Papers.