AN ANALYSIS OF GEORGIA'S 1938 SENATE RACE

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Ralph McGill called Georgia's 1938 Senate race "The greatest and most thrilling political spectacle in Georgia's history."[1] It was a dramatic occasion indeed when President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke in Barnesville, Georgia, on August 11, 1938. The President called for the defeat of the incumbent Senator Walter F. George and endorsed his own candidate Lawrence Camp, who was 100 percent for the New Deal. Camp, George, Governor E. D. Rivers, and Senator Richard B. Russell, Jr. were all on the stage with FDR.[2] Roosevelt only very briefly discussed the third candidate for the Senate, Eugene Talmadge, and did not even mention the fourth candidate, William G. McRae.[3]

The attack on George was Roosevelt's first on an incumbent Democratic candidate.[4] It is the purpose of this paper to focus on three main questions: First, why did FDR make this unprecedented move? Next, why did Roosevelt's efforts fail, and was the President's intervention a wise or unwise action? In answering these questions the 1938 Senate race will also be traced.

Why George's voting record so aroused the President is not clear. In Barnesville Roosevelt said, "I am impelled to make it clear that on most public questions, he and I do not speak the same language."[5] The President added, "The Senior Senator from Georgia cannot...be classified as belonging to the liberal school of thought."[6] The facts do not justify this condemnation. George had supported thirty-four of Roosevelt's bills and opposed only ten.[7] George voted against the Public Utility Holding Company Act, the Wages and Hours Bill, and the Court Enlargement Bill. However, the Senator voted for the Tennessee Valley Authority, the National Labor Relations Act, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Social Security, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the National Recovery Administration.[8] The New York Times well summarized George's voting record in saying that he had "generally supported the Administration" and differed from Roosevelt on "comparatively few matters."[9]

The President's great popularity in Georgia, and not George's voting record, may have been his main reason for opposing the Senator's re-election. Roosevelt had carried the state by five to one and twelve to one margins, and Meriwether County, where FDR had his Little White House in Warm Springs, by even larger margins.[10] Roosevelt's birthday was a legal holiday in Georgia.[11]

On Friday, May 13, 1938 Eugene Talmadge became the first candidate to oppose George. One paper noted the unlucky date,[12] and Talmadge had not been very lucky during the two preceding years. In the 1936 Senate race Richard B. Russell, Jr. trounced Talmadge, getting almost twice as many popular votes, winning in 143 counties and losing in only 16.[13]

"The Wild Man From Sugar Creek" also had the misfortune to be involved in a political meeting called the Grass Roots Convention, which met at Macon in January 1936. The Southern Committee to Uphold the Constitution sponsored the Convention. Although 10,000 people were expected, only 2500 to 3500 came. Their platform opposed, "'Negroes, the New Deal, and Karl Marx.'"[14] The Convention was extremely disorganized; it was not even clear who was and who was not a delegate. The Grass Roots

Convention voted to support Talmadge, but did not actually back him for any office.[15] Talmadge himself told one of his advisers, Hugh Howell, that the Convention had failed.[16]

The Macon Convention weakened Talmadge's attacks on business interests. In his May 13th announcement he attacked Senator George for being an agent of big business. However, most of the money for the Grass Roots Convention came from wealthy Republicans and businessmen such as John J. Raskob, Pierre S. DuPont, Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors, and L. S. Nudge of Wierton Steel.[17]

Lawrence Camp, who entered the race on June 1, chastised Talmadge for attacking George's big business support. Camp said, "The corporations, the railroads, and utility companies have left you--they are helping Senator George....The people of Georgia told you two years ago that this crowd would drop you."[18] Talmadge's only real asset was that he had not held office for two years, and he had no record to defend.

When Roosevelt actually decided to support a candidate against George is not entirely clear. As early as November 1937 FDR said he wanted progressive Democrats in Georgia and South Carolina.[20] In a March 23, 1938, address at Gainesville, FDR was introduced by Senator George, whom the President did not even mention during his speech. However, Roosevelt did make favorable comments about Governor Rivers.[21] In June 1938 the President asked Assistant Secretary Treasurer and treasurer of the national Democratic Party, Chip Robert, to run. Robert refused but suggested Lawrence Camp, who had been Richard Russell's campaign manager in 1934 and was the United States Attorney in Atlanta.[22]

Camp may have been a "manufactured candidate,"[23] but he was interested enough in the election to encourage Roosevelt to intervene. In May, 1938, Camp wired Roosevelt and said he thought the President's chances of winning were better in Georgia than in Florida, where a New Deal liberal, Senator Claude Pepper, had been elected.[24]

When Lawrence Camp announced his candidacy FDR did not immediately endorse him. Whether or not the President should have done so is a debatable point. By delaying his endorsement until August 10 Roosevelt gave Camp an opportunity to establish some personal identity with the voters. But FDR's wait made it easier for the Atlanta Constitution and prominent Georgians, especially Roosevelt supporters such as Wiley Moore, Abit Nix, and Emory Bass, to endorse George.[25] For example, Moore was an FDR supporter, but also chairman of the Fulton County George Club.[26] William McRae, the Townsendite candidate, correctly predicted that "Camp was doing his best to get hold of the President's coattail, but it may be worn too short for Camp to get a hold on it, before Roosevelt reaches Georgia."[27]

On July 4, 1938, Senator Walter F. George made his opening speech, which was his first stump speech since 1926.[28] George followed the same general format throughout the campaign. The Senator made an emotional appeal, stressing that he had been born in poverty. He listed many of his votes, which supported the New Deal and showed he was not a pawn of big business. George did not directly attack the President or even mention his name. This obvious omission must have been deliberate. Senator George did not want to do anything to encourage a presidential attack. The Atlanta Constitution was already speculating on whether or not Roosevelt would intervene in Georgia's Senate race.[29]

The fourth candidate, William McRae, had almost no influence on the election. He was an Atlanta lawyer who attacked the tariff as a "legal swindle" and supported the Townsend Plan of pensions for persons over sixty.[30] McRae made some effective retorts during the campaign. For instance, Roosevelt introduced Camp by saying he was "a gentleman, who I hope will be the next Senator from this state";[31] McRae later responded to FDR's statement by saying "I hope not."[32]

On August 5 McRae was arrested for speeding, passing a stop sign, operating an automobile without a driver's license, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest. He complained about his treatment, but admitted he was guilty of the charges.[33] This incident was the coup de grâce to McRae's struggling campaign. The Atlanta attorney was never a factor in the race. A Gallup Poll late in the election did not list McRae's vote, because it was only 2 percent.[34] On September 12 McRae withdrew from the race and endorsed Camp, whom he thought was the most liberal candidate. McRae claimed that George and Talmadge were for vested interests and against old age pensions.[35]

During the time before Roosevelt's visit, George continued his cautious strategy. On July 19 in Griffin he called the President, "a great and a good man."[36] George mentioned New Deal programs which he had supported, including the Soil Conservation Act, TVA, and others. George also accepted an invitation to attend Roosevelt's speech at Barnesville on August 11. Senator George added,"I am happy to know the President...is coming. He will be welcomed then, and he will always be welcomed in Georgia."[37] George even sent a personal note to FDR asking him for his support.[38]

In early August, when Roosevelt was en route to Warm Springs, he had still not announced that he would attempt to purge any Democrats. He must have known that it would be difficult to unseat George. A Gallup Poll released on August 6 showed that only 38 percent of all Southern rank and file Democrats said they would have supported all of the New Deal programs.[39] Although polls were not as sophisticated then as now, they did have credibility. The Atlanta Constitution ran an editorial praising Gallup's polls, claiming that in "the vast majority of cases the polls have come very close to the final result as decided by the voters."[40] The polls were a major reason why many political writers believed that the purge had been called off.[41] Also, very few of the people on the President's train believed that Camp could win.[42]

All doubt about the purge ended when Roosevelt endorsed Camp for the Senate during a luncheon at Warm Springs. The endorsement was made in an almost offhand manner and surprised the press, which had been told not to expect any important statements.[43]

Senator George immediately replied to Roosevelt's attack. Even though the Senator did not denounce business interests, he effectively noted the many times he "was not fighting for big business," such as when he had supported bank reform, bank deposit insurance, and control of stock and commodity exchanges. George said he had voted for bills giving bonuses to World War I veterans and aid to vocational education--bills which the President had threatened to veto.[44]

Roosevelt made two speeches in Georgia on August 11. First he spoke in Athens, where he received an honorary degree of doctor of laws. FDR's speech in Athens was more positive

than his March 23 speech at Gainesville in which he had told the crowd that they had to face the facts about the south's backward economy.[45] At Sanford Stadium Roosevelt stressed that Georgia's economy had improved. The President said the change was very obvious to him, because he had visited Georgia at different times, and he could more readily notice changes than someone who had stayed continuously in the state. FDR made no mention of the Senate race; that subject was saved for Barnesville.[46]

At Barnesville the President began his speech by relating that when he first came to Warm Springs it was a dilapidated, little used, old resort town. Roosevelt found that the electricity cost four times more in Meriwether County than in his hometown, Hyde Park, New York. This discovery led him to support development of the Rural Electrification Agency. The President officially came to Barnesville to celebrate the opening of a new REA project there. Roosevelt also discussed economic problems in the south and the need for strong leadership to help solve these problems. FDR said he was only giving his opinion, because he considered Georgia as his other home. The President then denounced George and gave unequivocal support to Camp.[47]

After his speech Roosevelt shook hands with George, who said "Mr. President I regret that you have taken this occasion to question my democracy and to attack my public record. I want you to know that I accept the challenge."[48] George's use of democracy in this context probably meant loyalty to the Democratic party.[49] Professor James C. Cobb says that Roosevelt's attack at Barnesville was the turning point of the campaign because it "shook George out of his lethargy, and gave him an exploitable issue."[50] This author also believes that without the President's intervention Talmadge might have beaten George.

The most effective part of FDR's speech was the brief but devastating attack on Eugene Talmadge:

> I have read so many of his proposals...so many of his panaceas that I am very certain in my own mind that his election would contribute little to practical government. This is all I can say about him.[51]

Roosevelt's claim that Georgia was his second home was well justified. From 1924 to 1938 he visited Warm springs every year--most of these visits were for several weeks and some lasted two months or more. The President spent a great amount of his time and money in establishing The Warm Springs Foundation.[52] He also owned over two thousand acres of farmland in Georgia in which he took great interest.

However, FDR's speech was vulnerable to attacks. As mentioned, George had supported most New Deal legislation; therefore, the President's endorsement of a candidate who said he would always support Roosevelt, combined with the court packing plan in 1937, gave some credence to the idea that FDR wanted to become a dictator.

Most newspapers' editorials were critical of the President's intervention. The Atlanta Constitution said Roosevelt wanted to be an Edgar Bergen with Georgia's new Senator as his dummy.[53] The Savannah News claimed that FDR wanted to reduce the legislative body to a "spineless group of

jellyfish."[54] A Washington paper compared Roosevelt's purge to Adolph Hitler's having the exclusive power of the prerogative.[55] It should be noted though that some of the Democrats Roosevelt attacked, such as "Cotton Ed" Smith and Millard Tydings, were conservatives who very strongly opposed the New Deal.

George's first official reply to Roosevelt, at Waycross on August 15, was one of the most moving talks that he ever gave. The normally reserved and dignified Senator drew frequent applause, and George was several times interrupted for two to three minutes of cheering. Because of the frequent outbursts, his speech went fifteen minutes over the expected time.[56] George himself was moved and nearly lost his composure. When he was describing his poor childhood, tears flowed down his cheeks. The fifteen hundred people inside the Waycross City Auditorium and several hundred outside it roared, "Yes," when George asked them if they wanted to choose their own senator.[57] Senator George made no apologies for his voting record and attacked anti-lynching laws, certain labor groups, and Communists. On the latter issue the Senator said,"I wear as a band of honor and will wear to the end of my days the condemnation of the Communist party."[58]

The crowd was obviously moved by the appeal to elect a "full-time Georgian" and to keep the Democratic Party from being a "one-man party."[59] George shrewdly used the issue of FDR's intervention, without directly attacking Roosevelt. The speech ended with most of the crowd rushing the platform to shake hands with George, while the American Legion band played "Dixie."[60] The Senator probably gave the most rousing speech of his career, and without using notes.[61]

George had won the day and would easily win the election. In rounded numbers George won 141,000 popular votes to Talmadge's 103,000 and Camp's 77,000. The county unit vote was 242 for George, 148 for Talmadge, and 209 for Camp.[62] Senator George carried Meriwether County and Lamar County (where Barnesville is located), although his victory margin in these counties was narrow. Camp finished third in both counties,[63] but did win Warm Springs with a large majority.

FDR had blundered in endorsing a weak candidate, and in underestimating the independence of the southern people.[64] Southerners were emotional about their leaders as shown by Ralph McGill's reaction to the Barnesville speech. McGill wrote in his column, "Never before had Roosevelt fired such a heavy charge at a man," and that the President "had mercilessly read George out of the New Deal."[65]

Despite his mistakes Roosevelt had backed a qualified candidate, who could have won under more favorable conditions. Camp had been attorney general of Georgia, a state legislator, and a United States' district court judge.[66] George had many advantages over Camp, such as more funds; he outspent his opponent by $44,000 to $17,000.[67] Camp had no organization and got no support from Governor Rivers or Senator Russell.[68]

Georgia's discriminatory voting laws especially harmed Camp. These laws, such as the white primary and the requirement that voters have forty acres of land or $500, disfranchised Camp's base of support, blacks and poor whites. These laws had a tremendous impact on Georgia's elections, because only 16.1 percent of the state's adult population voted in its 1936 presidential election.[69] In 1944 Senator George was again re-elected; he got 211,000 out of only 245,000 votes.

Even small one-party states such as Maine and Vermont had a much larger turnout percentage (of 30 to 65 percent) in their general election than Georgia's usual turnout in its Democratic primary.[70] Even the 1938 Democratic primary, with a president's intervention and national media coverage, drew only 321,851 voters.[71]

Camp's total was diluted even further by the county unit system, which underrepresented urban voters, who clearly would have more heavily supported Roosevelt's candidate. One writer believes that Camp's getting one-fourth of the vote, under these circumstances, was an accomplishment.[72]

Considering all of these handicaps, why did Roosevelt intervene? Ralph McGill said the President knew the odds were against him. Two Gallup Polls in early August 1938 showed that very few voters said that they would have supported all of the New Deal programs[73] and that FDR's popularity in Georgia had fallen 15 percent in comparison to a 1932 survey.[74] McGill thought the President knew about the polls, but took his stand strictly on principle because he was a stubborn and a courageous man.[75]

The Associated Press said that Roosevelt's intervention was possibly triggered by "a stunning blow" to the New Deal, when a FDR supporter, Senator James A. Pope of Idaho, was defeated by a conservative.[76] Roosevelt had not officially announced for Camp before the Idaho election. The President's endorsement at Warm Springs surprised even his aides and appeared to be impulsive; it may have been a hasty attempt to compensate for the Pope loss.

Stewart Alsop, William Anderson, and Theo Lippman, Jr. speculated that FDR feared George's election more than Talmadge's, because the Senator strongly influenced other senators, while "The Wild Man From Sugar Creek" would not have. However, Roosevelt was already saddled with many conservative southern Democrats, such as Carter Glass, "Cotton Ed" Smith, Millard Tydings, and Josiah W. Bailey, who often voted against New Deal legislation. The last thing Roosevelt needed was the election of another conservative southern Democrat.

The President may have hoped that George and Talmadge would split the conservative vote, and that the liberal Camp would squeak out a narrow victory. In August 1938 Roosevelt's New Deal candidates had won in Senate races in Florida and Alabama; the Idaho race had been the President's first defeat.[77] Therefore, Roosevelt may have believed that Camp could win. Furthermore, if a New Deal candidate had defeated or even nearly beaten the popular and influential George, it would have set a powerful example. Then any senator would have had to think twice before opposing the President.[78]

These theories assume that FDR's decision was a totally rational judgment, but Roosevelt might have been influenced by other factors. He might, for example, simply not have liked George.[79] Roosevelt's complimentary remarks and his response to George's brief statement after the President's speech have the sound of insincerity. McGill noticed that Roosevelt was embarrassed when he and George shook hands, and there is no indication that the two really were friends.

President Roosevelt's heavy-handed intervention, and George's initially restrained reaction should not lead to an overly sympathetic analysis of the Senator's campaign. The day before the election Walter F. George claimed that "only campaign issues had been discussed, not personalities."[81]

However, George won mainly on the issue that an outsider should not interfere in Georgia, and he said, for instance, "On tomorrow September 14, every Georgian will do his or her duty."[82] The Senator even compared Roosevelt's support of Camp to Sherman's March.[83] The image of FDR as a carpetbagger was hardly fair. Roosevelt was a taxpayer and part-time resident of Georgia.[84]

Roosevelt was outmaneuvered by George, who made his intervention appear as a gross intrusion. Senator George used tactics which verged on demagoguery. He used the race issue and attacked anti-lynching laws and Communists, whom neither Camp or Roosevelt supported, or even knew, and who had nothing to do with the campaign. Near the end of the Senate race, Camp got desperate and joined George and Talmadge in attacking anti-lynching laws.[85]

Senator George proved to be a very astute politician. Early in the campaign he did nothing to antagonize the President. George's meek immediate response made FDR's attack appear all the more unfair and harsh. How well George manipulated the President's endorsement of Camp was aptly described by Margaret Mitchell:

> For the first time time in more years than I can remember there's a real issue in Georgia politics, and a bitter one. People who were for Roosevelt before go around muttering, "I'm damned if any Yankee is going to tell me how to mark my ballot.'"[86]

NOTES

[1]Ralph McGill, "Tense President Reading George Out of New Deal," Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 10.
[2]Theo Lippman, Jr., The Squire of Warm Springs: FDR In Georgia, 1924-1945 (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1977), p. 166.
[3]"Roosevelt Opens War Against George; Senator Accepts Challenge," Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 1.
[4]Felix Blair, "Camp at Luncheon," New York Times, 11 August 1938, p. 1.
[5]"Text of the President's Speech at Barnesville," Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 8.
[6]Ibid.
[7]Luther Harmon Zeigler, Jr., "Senator Walter George's 1938 Campaign,"Georgia Historical Quarterly, 43 (December 1959): p. 333.
[8]Lippman, p. 169.
[9]"Press Comments," Rome News-Tribune, 12 August 1938, p.1.
[10]Lippman, p. 157.
[11]Ibid., p. 175.
[12]L. A. Farrell, "Talmadge Enters Senate Contest Against George," Atlanta Constitution, 14 May 1938, p. 1.
[13]William Anderson, The Wild Man From Sugar Creek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), p. 164.
[14]Ibid., p. 139.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Ibid., p. 140.
[17]Allan A. Michie and Frank Ryhlick, Dixie Demagogues (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1939), pp. 186-87.
[18]Quoted in "Camp Addresses Three Audiences, Concentrating His Fire on George," Atlanta Constitution, 5 July 1938, p. 2.

[19]Michie and Ryhlick, p. 199.
[20]Lippman, p. 161.
[21]Ziegler, p. 335.
[22]Anderson, pp. 173-74.
[23]Ziegler, p. 335.
[24]Lippman, p. 164.
[25]Ziegler, pp. 337-38.
[26]"George Club to Welcome FDR," Atlanta Constitution, 7 August 1938, p. 6.
[27]Alan Abele, "Candidates Join In Close-up Tilts," Atlanta Constitution, 20 July 1938, p. 3.
[28]Ed Bridges, "George Reviews His Senate Record in Opening Speech," Atlanta Constitution, 5 July 1938, p. 10.
[29]Ibid.
[30]"Tariff Attacked In McRae Speech," Atlanta Constitution, 5 July 1938, p. 10.
[31]Quoted in L. A. Farrell, "Roosevelt Throws Weight Behind Camp In Prelude to Barnesville Talk," Atlanta Constitution, 11 August 1938.
[32]Ibid., p. 4.
[33]"Senate Candidate McRae Arrested on Variety of Charges In Avondale," Atlanta Constitution, 6 August 1938, p. 1 and p. 6.
[34]George Gallup, "George Leads Urban, Rural Poll Returns," Atlanta Constitution, 7 September 1938, p. 1.
[35]"McRae Withdraws: To Support Camp," Atlanta Constitution, 13 September 1938, p. 3.
[36]Quoted in Alan Abele, "Candidates Join In Close-up Tilts," Atlanta Constitution, 20 July 1938, p. 1.
[37]Ibid., p. 3.
[38]James C. Cobb, "Not Gone, But Forgotten: Eugene Talmadge and the 1938 Purge Campaign," Georgia Historical Quarterly, 59 (Winter 1975): p. 201.
[39]George Gallup, "23 out of 100 Voters are 100 Per Cent For New Deal," Atlanta Constitution, 7 August 1938, p. 1.
[40]Atlanta Constitution, 6 September 1938, p. 6.
[41]Atlanta Constitution, 7 August 1938, p. 1.
[42]Felix Blair, Jr., "Camp at Luncheon," New York Times, 11 August 1938, p. 2.
[43]Ibid.
[44]"George Hits At Roosevelt," New York Times, 11 August 1938, p. 2.
[45]L. A. Farrell, "Roosevelt Revives Fight for Increased Wages in Dedication of Gainesville's New Square," Atlanta Constitution, 24 March 1938, p. 1.
[46]Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 14.
[47]"Text of the President's Speech at Barnesville," Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 8.
[48]Quoted in Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 1.
[49]Finis Farr, FDR (New Rochelle, N. Y.: Arlington House, 1972), p. 302.
[50]Cobb, p. 206.
[51]"Text of Speech," Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 10.
[52]Lippman, pp. 243-44.
[53]"There Ain't No Such Animal," Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 10.
[54]Ibid.
[55]"Press Comments," Rome News-Tribune, 12 August 1938, p. 1.
[56]Gladstone Williams, "Throng's Cheers Force George to Exceed His Time At Waycross," Atlanta Constitution, 16 August 1938, p.

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[57]Ibid.
[58]Quoted in Ed L. Bridges, "Democratic Party Is Not One Man Party George Declares In Reply to Roosevelt," Atlanta Constitution, 16 August 1938, p. 7.
[59]Turner Catledge, "George Asks For Fight On One-Man Rule," New York Times, 16 August 1938, p. 2.
[60]Ibid.; Atlanta Constitution, 16 August 1938, p. 7.
[61]"George Speaks Without Notes," Atlanta Constitution, 16 August 1938, p. 6.
[63]"No Statement From President On George Vote," Atlanta Constitution, 16 September 1938, p. 1.
[64]Anderson, p. 184.
[65]Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 10.
[66]Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 8; Lippman, p. 168.
[67]Lippman, p. 174.
[68]Lippman, p. 171; New York Times, 14 August 1938, p. 3.
[69]Michie and Ryhlick, p. 200.
[70]V. O. Key, Southern Politics: In State and Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 497-98.
[71]Atlanta Constitution, 16 September 1938, p. 8.
[72]Lippman, p. 176.
[73]George Gallup, "FDR Popularity in Georgia Declines 15 Per Cent to 72," Atlanta Constitution, 10 August 1938, p. 1.
[75]Ralph McGill, Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 10.
[76]John M. Hightower, "Defeat of Pope Held As Motive of Indorsement of Camp," Atlanta Constitution, 11 August 1938, p. 1.
[77]Lippman, p. 165.
[78]Ibid., p. 176.
[79]Ibid., p. 174.
[80]McGill, Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1938, p. 4.
[81]"Only Campaign Issues Discussed Not Personalities, Says George," Atlanta Constitution, 13 September 1938, p. 4.
[82]Ibid.
[83]Zeigler, p. 346.
[84]Ibid., p. 340.
[85]Michie and Ryhlick, p. 198.
[86]Richard Harwell Editor, Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind Letters 1936-1949 (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), p. 224.