

Republican, First, Last, and Always

Republican, First, Last, and Always:
A Biography of B. Carroll Reece

By

F. Suzanne Bowers

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

“I do not think we have a right to take our people’s money and use it to try to raise the standard of living of the people in all the nations of the earth—we simply cannot carry the world on our back.”¹ B. Carroll Reece wrote these words in a letter to a newspaper in late 1952, during the height of the Korean War. Although directly referring to the high cost in American lives during the fighting, Reece’s words also defined his political viewpoint throughout his forty-plus years in politics. Born in a rural area of upper-East Tennessee, Reece rose to political dominance in the state’s Republican Party and became a confidant of one of the nation’s leading Republican figures. He believed that American democracy hinged on capitalism, and his extensive studies in finance and economics shaped his decisions throughout his career. Reece led one of the most virulent attacks against foundations during the 1950s because he believed these organizations used grant money to foster what he considered un-American ideals. Through Reece’s career, it is possible to trace the fight against communism through an economic standpoint from the end of World War I to the downfall of America’s most notorious anti-communist.

The struggle to maintain a balance between the Republicans in Reece’s home district and their distrust of an expanding federal government characterized much of his political career. Reece lived in East Tennessee—politically defined as the First and Second Districts, stretching from Knox County eastward to the state line. Nestled in the Appalachian Mountains, most of the area remained skeptical of the strong federal government established after the Civil War. The economic and social problems that resulted from the war led a number of Americans to turn to local leaders to shield themselves from the many changes that followed. This attitude intensified during later crises, including the Great Depression and both World Wars, leading to the hostility that surfaced to the New Deal and to those considered outsiders. The region desired the money that came with federal programs but found the changes in social structure that came with the money intolerable. East Tennessee remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War, but it placed heavy emphasis on local autonomy. Once East Tennessee became associated with the Republican Party it rarely split its vote, which was characteristic of many Appalachian regions. This allowed

local leaders to become almost immovable as long as they maintained community approval.²

Reece displayed an aversion to communism soon after his election to the United States House of Representatives. His experiences in World War I, combined with his father-in-law's hatred of communism and socialism, influenced him to become more dedicated to its eradication. The government proposal to operate the nitrate and power plants at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, in the 1920s seemed too similar to communism, prompting Reece to support private ownership of the facility. Although Reece worked to increase compensation and pensions for war veterans and to reduce high freight rates for farmers in his district, his stand on Muscle Shoals threatened his career in the House. His district desired the advantages of public operation, and his determination to submit a bill for private ownership appeared to his constituents to be a delay in resolving the issue. His actions continued to be a concern and a tool used against him in later elections, yet Reece stood by his decision and insisted that he based his actions on what he felt would prevent Communists from having the opportunity to damage private enterprise.

Reece's loyalty to his district and to the Republican Party secured his position in Congress, and he learned that East Tennesseans expected Congressmen to effectively balance national issues with local desires. He did this so successfully that he rarely returned home to campaign for reelection during his eighteen terms in the House. When the Old Guard Republicans tried to buttress their dwindling power within the party, Reece's banking background and organizational skills proved invaluable. Republicans selected Reece as chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1946, a shock to a number of leading Republicans in the nation. Many wondered how a congressman from a little-known area in East Tennessee with no major legislation bearing his name became the leading figure of the Republican Party. In addition to his relative anonymity in the national sphere, a number of newspaper articles reported Reece to have been a poor public speaker, and he most likely had a stutter.³ The answer to Reece's selection lies in shrewd political maneuvering by Reece and the desire of the Republican Party to regain a majority in Congress. Reece made strategic political allies with men like Herbert Hoover and Robert Taft and placed himself in view of many of the nation's leading political figures. His ineffectual oratory forced him to compensate with other strengths, such as his firm grasp of economics and his keen ability to relate to people on a basic level. More importantly, the Republican Party saw Reece as a tool that could break the Southern stronghold and usher a return of black voters. Reece's private income

became the decisive factor after he volunteered to serve as chairman without pay.

Robert A. Taft soon became the central influence in Reece's political career. Reece campaigned for Taft in hopes of helping him win the elusive Republican nomination for president. Many came to view Reece as little more than Taft's Southern mouthpiece. He earned a position on Taft's national campaign team in 1952, when Republicans determined to win the White House. Many blamed Reece for Taft's failure to secure the nomination, but in reality, the nation had moved away from many of the conservative ideas of Reece and Taft. Taft never blamed Reece publicly for his loss, and his letters to Reece evidence that their personal friendship remained strong through all their political turmoil.

The rise of the Soviet Union as a dominant world power after World War II became one of the central political issues late in Reece's career. Prior to 1917, communism seemed to be an unworkable ideal, but after the Russian Revolution it emerged as a real threat. In the United States, the Red Scare precipitated sixty years of suspicion and hostility towards communism. Americans feared that Communists planned to overthrow the American government through a variety of avenues. Thus, Congress and others in positions of power launched investigations through any facet that offered a weakness to communist infiltrators, including propaganda, Hollywood, educational facilities, and government employees. The Fish Committee, commissioned in 1930, analyzed communist activities within the United States and concluded following a brief investigation with minor recommendations. In 1934 Congress authorized a Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, known as the McCormack-Dickstein Committee, to study Nazi propaganda, on the rise with Adolf Hitler's ascension to Chancellor in Germany. After the committee's one-year investigation, Congress did not sanction any other investigation until 1938, when Representative Martin Dies of Texas insisted that a special committee needed to resume the investigation into un-American activities and propaganda. The Dies Committee convened until 1944, when Dies decided not to seek reelection to the House. After American involvement in World War II and the threat presented by communist power in Russia, internal security became foremost among the minds of congressmen.

These investigations assumed a heightened importance in the decade after the war. Few remained outside the reach of those determined to prevent communism from destroying democracy. During the opening session of the 1945 House of Representatives, John Rankin of Mississippi proposed an amendment that created the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) as a standing committee of the House.

HUAC's investigations into labor, Hollywood, and government offices prompted the blacklisting and dismissal of a number of university professors and employees, making it increasingly difficult to express radical viewpoints or associate with communist groups. In 1950 the Senate created the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) to investigate subversion, and Senator Joseph McCarthy declared to possess a list of communists working in the State Department.

Reece became consumed with rooting out Communist influence from every corner of American life. He enlisted the help of Republicans across the entire nation to support the fight against communism. In 1946 he led the Republican charge against Democrats in the congressional elections based on subversion and infiltration of the American government. Reece believed that large foundations represented one of the weaknesses through which communists could destroy American democracy. He implied that not only had subversives infiltrated foundations, but also that foundation trustees and directors made bad decisions with grant money through their choice of recipients. Reece attacked not the ideology of communism, but the economic decisions made by foundations that he believed fostered subversion and anti-American principles. In 1952 he served on the Cox Committee, which investigated tax-exempt foundations for subversive activity. The committee failed to find any evidence of illegal activity within foundations, and Cox's death in 1953 ended the investigation. Later that year, however, Reece introduced a bill to reopen the investigation on the premise that the Cox Committee had failed to complete its work. The House commissioned the Reece Committee in 1954 to investigate foundations and grants given to educational institutions. The Reece Committee's controversial public hearings lasted less than two months, during which time Reece accused well-known foundations—including the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Foundation, and Rockefeller Foundation—of fostering subversion.

The Reece Committee faced numerous troubles from its inception. Few believed Reece's assertion that foundations used grants to foster subversion in education. Most recognized the grudge Reece held toward liberal Republicans and his desire to avenge Taft's presidential nomination loss. The staff chosen to work on the committee increased its ineffectiveness by their obvious bias toward the foundations targeted. One Congressman on the committee, however, refused to allow the committee to assassinate the character of foundations without evidence. Reece supported the committee's critical final report, which went out of print shortly after its appearance and received little more than cursory notice from Congress. Throughout his final years, Reece maintained his belief

that subversives infiltrated foundations, and subsequent investigations by Congress in the early 1960s must have seemed justification of Reece's vendetta.

Almost all of Reece's attempts to protect his district and American democracy turned disastrous. His effort to direct the operation of Muscle Shoals into the hands of private enterprise to promote the interests of his home state eventually cost him his seat in Congress. The creation of the power plants through the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which brought less expensive electricity to his district and forced Reece to support government operation, flooded his hometown as part of its development. His desire to ensure the security of the nation and its educational systems prompted him to lead an investigation the same year that McCarthy and his supporters became discredited in the eyes of the nation. Reece became the leader of the Republican Party, yet few recognized his name and newspapers often misspelled it.

Reece's life and career reflect the complexities present in United States history throughout the twentieth century. A pocket of Republican power in East Tennessee had little influence on state elections, although Republicans increasingly carried the state in presidential elections. Republicans could, however, wield their power over their district representative to Congress. This led to an understanding between the party leaders in the state that often became the source of criticism from both parties. Reece exploited this agreement and his position to remain in office and also gain patronage for his district. His career revealed the complex dynamics that developed among mountain Republicans who disliked a strong central government but desired the advantages that such a government could provide. Newspapers that supported Reece portrayed him as a wholesome person who refrained from smoking or drinking. Articles lauded his military record, his family, and his faith in the Republican Party. Pictures of Reece during his tenure as chairman always showed him with a laugh or smile on his face. Those who opposed Reece depicted him as unintelligent and a bad speaker, with loyalty bordering on blind servitude. The truth of Reece's life and career exists somewhere in the middle. A look at his life reveals how both local and national politics merged to create a distinct political culture that had been building for decades. This unique culture foreshadowed the conversion of the South to conservative Republicanism. Specifically, Reece's political career traces a politician who molded his career around his belief that America's strongest defense against foreign threats was a strong economy.⁴

CHAPTER ONE

REECE, WHO ARE YOU?

Thirteen is not an unlucky number

In the rolling hills of East Tennessee, the Reece family sprang from humble origins to accomplish monumental things. In 1871, Rev. L.L. Maples founded Aenon Seminary in a remote area of Tennessee known as Butler. His daughter Sarah Emmaline Maples attended Aenon, where she met John Isaac Reece.¹ They married with only two assets: \$150 in savings and a determination to raise a family. In 1876 seventeen-year-old Sarah bore John the first of their children, and in the following twenty-five years, Sarah gave birth to thirteen more children. Of the fourteen, only one failed to live past his first year at a time and place of high infant mortality. A local paper interviewed John about his large family and the challenges associated with it. “Thirteen is not an unlucky number,” John replied. He and Sarah prided themselves on their ability to raise their children in what they considered to be comfort and informed the reporter that they had given “each a good education, at the same time saving sufficient money to buy a farm and build a house affording ample room for such a family.” John owned 130 acres of land that he farmed to support his family. He made the children’s shoes, and some had to go barefoot until well into the fall when he had time and money to complete them. All of the children worked on the farm and at other jobs to help support the family. Eight of the thirteen children attended college by the start of World War I, a remarkable feat for such a poor and uneducated area.²

Butler’s origins trace back to the Revolutionary Era. Cherokee Indians named a river in northeastern Tennessee the Watauga, meaning “beautiful river.” According to legend, Daniel Boone passed through this area in 1769 on his way to Kentucky. On his journey, Boone’s favorite horse became lame, and he released her on the banks of a stream to fend for herself. The next year, this same horse, fully recovered and healthy, met Boone as he passed back through the area. Boone then named the creek “Old Roan,” after his horse. Roan Creek flowed into the Watauga at the lower end of Butler. The area possessed many of the characteristics of an

Appalachian region—families centered on kinship ties and residents placed an emphasis on face-to-face interaction. Most worked to make ends meet rather than to make a profit. They often taught their children to hunt at a young age in order to help support the family.³

Butler remained a small town in the corner of upper East Tennessee. It consisted of mostly private homes, and many of the families had lived there for generations. The area contained few opportunities for industry until the arrival of the railroad in the early 1900s. The Whiting Lumber Company, J. Minish Furniture Company, John B. Wilson Casket Company, and Cozier Wood Package Company furnished Butler with factory jobs. The other businesses in the town included cafés, a general store, a drugstore, a post office, a filling station, barber and beauty shops, the Bluebird Tea Room, and Shupe's Hotel. Residents could attend Butler Christian Church, Butler Baptist Church, or Butler Methodist Church. The town had one school and two water fountains.⁴

The Reece family claimed a long history of military service both in Tennessee and in the nation. A great-great-great-grandfather, Captain Jacob Brown, reportedly founded the Nolachuckey settlement, the first in the East Tennessee section of the Great Smoky Mountains. Local historians credit Brown with the first store in this area, supplied with goods brought by packhorses from the Carolinas. Captain Brown fought with John Sevier, the first governor of Tennessee, in the Battle of King's Mountain during the Revolutionary War. Major General Brazilla Carroll McBride, the namesake and great-great uncle of Brazilla Carroll Reece, fought in the War of 1812 and married the sister of Revolutionary War hero Nathaniel Greene. John Reece's family continued this military tradition as five of the ten boys served in the military: Wilson Landrine and John Eggers during the Spanish-American War, Brazilla Carroll and Lemuel in the army during World War I, and Raleigh Valentine in the Army Air Corp during World War II.⁵

Born on December 22, 1889, Brazilla Carroll Reece entered the world at a time when America still nursed fresh wounds on its way to recovery from its most devastating and deadly war. The government in Washington officially ended Reconstruction in 1877, but few in the nation embraced the new citizens as equals. The South maintained a strong Christian heritage that stemmed from the Second Great Awakening and had been bolstered by southerners' growing respect and nostalgia for the past as embodied by the Lost Cause. Both of these are evident in the names given to the Reece children. The name Brazilla most likely comes from the Old Testament name Barzillai, meaning "iron" or "strong." The Bible records Barzillai as showing hospitality to the future king David when he fled

from Absalom, but Barzillai declined the king's offer to spend his last days at court.⁶ Although his Christian name inspired thoughts of integrity and strength, B. Carroll Reece chose to forego the use of his ancestor's first name in order to assert his own identity. His experiences during his first thirty years developed the perseverance and dedication that would later characterize his career in the United States House of Representatives.



Figure 1.1 The Reece Family. Left to right: John Isaac Reece, Sarah Maples Reece, James Lafayette Reece, Wilson Landrine Reece, John Eggers Reece, Walter Jacob Reece, Joseph Isaac Reece, Amanda Catherine Reece, Asa Clayton Reece, Brazilla Carroll Reece, Lemuel L. Reece, Millard Brown Reece, Laura Ruth Reece, Anna Reece, and Raleigh Valentine Reece. Courtesy of the B. Carroll Reece Papers at the Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

Education is what develops savage man into civilized man

Reece and his family placed great emphasis on learning, a rare trait in such a rural area. He began his formal education in the same school where his parents met. By the time Reece entered school his grandfather had sold Aenon, re-named Holly Springs College in 1886. After being purchased by the Watauga Baptist Association, it officially became Watauga Academy in 1906. Although Reece's parents had been able to send him to a public school five miles away, he had to work summers in the woods peeling tan bark for eighty-five cents per day in order to attend Watauga Academy. Twenty cents of that income supported the food and educational costs for eight of his siblings. Despite the difficulty of working while attending

school, Reece became one of the first two graduates of Watauga Academy in 1908. His first teaching position paid him a salary of thirty-five dollars per month. After less than two years of teaching, he decided to continue his education at Carson and Newman College. He enrolled in a variety of courses, including psychology, debate, German, French, and pedagogy. Reece played basketball and served as captain of the football team. He earned high grades and graduated as valedictorian of his class in 1914 with a Bachelor of Arts degree.⁷



Figure 1-2. The basketball team at Carson-Newman College, circa 1913-1914. Reece is second from the left on the back row. Courtesy of the B. Carroll Reece Papers at the Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

The assignments Reece completed during these early years revealed much about his developing character, idealism, and sense of morality. In a speech that debated the question of nature versus education in forming the character of man, he took the position of education and argued that once prisoners were educated they became law abiding citizens. "Education is what develops savage man into civilized man," Reece wrote, because "nature without education is blank." In one essay he recognized the need for many rural schools to incorporate advances in agriculture into their curriculum because of the monotonous nature of farm life where "the girls

will become discouraged and the boys will become restless and leave for the city.” Reece revealed his pride in being an American when he commended Theodore Roosevelt as “an example of the most modern Americanism” and lauded adversity as “the gateway to success and to greatness.” Reece described education as a privilege, of which the recipients bore the responsibility to convey their knowledge to others.⁸

Reece wrote a number of essays that revealed his increasing belief of war as undesirable. Pointing to various wars in history, including the Peloponnesian War and the Boer War, he wrote that “taking human nature as a whole, its wars are its best protection against its weaker and more cowardly self, and that mankind cannot afford to adopt a peaceful economy.” In a later essay he described war as “one of the greatest evils that has ever been intentionally maintained by man” because it separated the family, often took the lives of young men, and drained a country of its resources. Reece believed that God must have given man a spirit of war, though he questioned whether God “intended for man to rule by force of arms.” Citing the Revolutionary War, he reasoned that some wars for independence were justified, but asserted war was no longer necessary because intelligent people responded to reason. “Now it is that all international disputes should be settled by arbitration and the people ought to no longer be burdened by war . . . they ought no longer in this new era of learning and civilization be forced to endure the attendant miseries of war.”⁹ This viewpoint became increasingly evident during the opening years of World War II, when Reece advocated isolationism rather than participation in what he often described as Europe’s war.

Reece’s essays also revealed his emerging viewpoint on government and America’s position in the world. He called for support for America from all nationalities living within the United States and prophetically wrote that he could not “imagine any greater misfortune that can befall mankind than to have any two of the great nations of the world feel that their interests necessitate a trial of strength with each other.” He predicted that this would involve all other nations of the world in a manner never seen. In an essay comparing the English system of government with the American republican system, he concluded that the cabinet form could not exist anywhere outside of England because of specific conditions that existed only within that nation. He concluded that the American form of government was better and was the model towards which other nations looked—a modern-day city on a hill. “Thus do we set the mark in legislation and government, and thus do we lead the world by reason of the able enterprise and sure judgment of the Fathers of our Government.” This idealism about American government and capitalism influenced his ideas

regarding communism and its spread throughout Europe and Asia during his Congressional career. Although written in his early years, Reece adhered to these principles throughout his life.¹⁰

Reece continued teaching after he received his degree from Carson and Newman College. Letters of recommendation written by faculty conveyed their high opinion of Reece and his abilities as both a teacher and a student. Former teachers described Reece as “an excellent instructor,” “a young man of Christian ideals, of real worth and strength of character,” “an unusually brilliant young man,” and “a man of splendid ability and high ideals.”¹¹ He made inquiries into a position as a high school principal in Cookeville, Tennessee, in 1914, and received a job offer from the Central Education Bureau in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1915 to teach mathematics and German at an annual salary of \$1,200. He declined this position, as well as one in Mooresburg, Tennessee, to enroll in New York University (NYU) in 1915 to pursue a Master’s Degree in economics and finance. At the same time, he received a Master of Arts degree from Carson and Newman in philosophy and English literature, although the school delayed reporting the official designation until 1920. When he graduated from NYU in 1916, Reece continued on at the school as Assistant Secretary and Instructor through 1917. As the United States entered World War I, Reece took a leave of absence from his post to enlist in the army.¹²

Our company commander, well, ain’t he a fine fellow!

Europe maintained a precarious peace during the first decade of the twentieth century. Years of economic competition, a surge in nationalism, and a complicated system of alliances kept many European nations cautiously aware of their neighbors. On June 28, 1914, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist upset this delicate balance and became the catalyst for war. As the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia, alliances among Russia, Germany, Britain, and France drew most of Europe into the conflict.

The war that most assumed would end quickly turned into an impasse that lasted three years. New technology and weaponry made this war deadlier than any previous. Following the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 and the *Sussex* in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson warned Germany against provoking American entry into the war. In February 1917, Wilson received a copy of a telegram that Britain intercepted from the German foreign minister, Arthur Zimmerman, which promised Mexico the territory in the Southwest that had been ceded to the United States if Mexico

entered the war on the side of Germany. The telegram, combined with the March 1917 revolution in Russia, removed the last obstacle to American participation. Wilson appealed to Congress to declare war on Germany, and the United States officially entered World War I on April 6, 1917. America then faced the challenge of mobilizing an economy, the population, and a large army. Because of the immediate need for officers, the army rushed many through training in the Plattsburg style. This training was very basic, and bad weather or lack of supplies often prevented troops from completing their training.¹³ Most of the soldiers arrived in Europe unprepared for the battles to come. Both soldiers and leaders had to learn “on the job,” at the risk of high casualties.¹⁴

Reece followed in the footsteps of his older brothers as the United States entered the world conflict. On April 24, 1917, eighteen days after the United States officially declared war, he enrolled into the Plattsburg Reserve Officers Training Camp in New York. At twenty-seven, he weighed only 135 pounds and measured five-feet-nine-inches tall. At his graduation from training on August 10, 1917, Reece took an oath as Second Lieutenant, Infantry Section, Officers Reserve Corp.¹⁵ In September, he received orders that assigned him to the Rainbow Division, 166th Infantry, Company A, under command of Major General Mann. The Rainbow Division deployed the following month to serve with the American Expeditionary Force in Europe.

Reece’s keepsakes from the war reflect both his hurried training and his lack of experience. Among the tokens that survived were booklets issued by the army on visual signaling and the role of a Platoon Commander. The latter included important questions a commander should ask himself before taking over a trench, before an attack, and after gaining the objective of an attack. The necessity of this guide reflected the absence of combat time for officers and troops. One of the more interesting mementos was a personal notebook that Reece kept with military figures, lists of officers, times, and a personal note of caution: “Do not defecate [sic] around kitchen.”¹⁶ He remained with the 166th Infantry throughout 1917 and into 1918 when they entered the front on February 22nd. He then transferred to the 26th Division, 102nd Infantry on May 1st and continued as part of their offensive until the war’s end.

Reece dedicated himself to both his military duty and his men. A June patrol order from the headquarters of the 3rd Battalion, 102nd Infantry, ordered Reece to command an exploring patrol into enemy territory in order to locate an enemy observation post and take prisoners, but his first true encounter in battle came at Aisne-Marne on July 18-26, 1918. His combat experience grew as General Pershing led American troops,

including Reece, at St. Mihiel from September 12-16 in an attempt to drive the Germans away from Verdun. Before they could succeed, the Allied forces persuaded Pershing to reduce his objectives and turn his attention to the Meuse River-Argonne Forest region. The drive at St. Mihiel proved less successful than Pershing had hoped, but the troops learned much about war on the Western Front.¹⁷ Reece earned the nickname “Pop” among Company M because of the way he tended to look after them. One report stated that after fighting at St. Mihiel, Reece attempted to rouse his troops for a return to the front with “Men, we are making history. Forward!” They demonstrated their fatigue with the war with responses of “The hell with history!” and “Go swipe us some chow, Pop.”¹⁸

The Allied forces began a massive assault at the Meuse-Argonne front in late September that became the decisive battle of the war. The delay in transporting weapons and soldiers to the front caused fighting to stalemate, compounded by General Pershing’s insistence that the American troops remain separate from those of the other Allied forces. The troops’ dependence on the French for supplies and weapons, however, forced Pershing to finally agree to officially serve under Marshall Petain. After recapturing Verdun, the German forces withdrew to their second lines of defense. The job of attaining a key sector, Hill #360, fell to the 26th Division on October 24th. Woods covered the top of the hill, and remnants of trees destroyed by battle shadowed its slopes. German troops dug into pillboxes and trenches and continually rained heavy shells on the road leading to this hill, giving the area the nickname “Death Valley.” American troops fighting from shell holes slowly gained the slopes of the hill, with heavy casualties. The battle raged during daylight, and troops attempted to recover their wounded under cover of dusk. The German flares and subsequent machine guns increased the difficulty of the rescues.¹⁹

On October 27th, 1918, the 102nd Infantry received a handwritten field order from headquarters to gain possession of Hill #360 in Bois d’Ormont after an artillery preparation against German forces. Reece and his men faced a hidden danger during this assault. Germany first used gas attacks on April 22, 1915, on an unprepared French and British military. Britain’s retaliation caused Germany to develop a more toxic gas in the form of a liquid poison that turned yellow when exposed to the air. This mustard gas could penetrate clothing and remained active for weeks on the ground or on bushes, forcing Allied troops to be more cautious when they advanced. On October 12th, the Germans began a thirty-four hour bombing of Bois d’Ormont with mustard gas shells. Reece and his men likely suffered exposure to remaining traces of this gas. Reece led the offensive to the

crest of the hill, but bursting shells threw him to the ground, twice knocking him unconscious. When he regained consciousness, he reorganized his command and held firm to his position. He braved machine gun fire several times to crawl in advance of the Allied front line in order to rescue wounded men hiding in shell holes. The strength of the German entrenchment and intense artillery fire finally forced the army to issue an order to draw back despite the advance. By November the Allied forces pushed German troops back to their own border and cut supply lines, prompting Germany to seek an armistice.²⁰

Reece's actions during this assault earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, the French Croix de Guerre with Palm, and citations from Marshall Petain as well as the Division Brigade and Regimental Commanders. Marshall Petain described Reece as "an officer of great bravery . . . He gave proof of the finest devotion by going to look for the wounded of his Company left between the lines." The fighting temporarily placed Reece in command of the 3rd Battalion, which the commendation for the Distinguished Service Medal described as "a task of great difficulty" because the battalion became disorganized with high casualties. Despite these difficulties Reece "displayed marked ability and determination in reorganizing his command and moulding [sic] it into a good fighting unit, able under his leadership to achieve valuable results." He also received a commendation from the Major General of the 26th Division, who entered Reece's name and actions in the record of The Yankee Division. Reece retained command of the 3rd Battalion through the end of the war.²¹

The armistice designated November 11, 1918, as the end of fighting in Europe. Many in the military, however, lacked confidence in this agreement. Reece received orders on November 10th to take his men "over the top"—out of the trenches toward enemy lines—at 9:15 the next morning. Rumors of the armistice, to take place at 11:00 that morning, made him hesitate leading his men to possible death. He thus faced the dilemma of risking the lives of his men or openly defying a military order, an act that could have resulted in a court martial if rumors of the armistice proved false. Reece's solution entailed telling his men to go over the top but to find the nearest shell-hole and stay there for the next hour and forty-five minutes. Reece spent that time wondering if he would be court-martialed for failing to take his objective. At the designated time, both sides laid down their arms, and Reece and his men survived without loss of life or honor.²²

Reece's stellar military reputation extended down to the common soldier. After fighting in the Argonne Forest, Sergeant Ramsay wrote to

his brother Jack that “our company commander, well, ain’t he a fine fellow! Gosh! Jack he is a prince. He takes such great pains in his men. When we went over the top the last time, he was right there with a bayonet and rifle, and I said to myself the first Dutchman that gets him does not go back to tell about it.”²³ The loyalty that Reece inspired in his men lasted long after the war. When he decided to run for a congressional seat, the surviving men from his company submitted a letter to be used in publication. They described Reece as “like a father to us . . . a great fellow.” They cited both his bravery and his loyalty as characteristics that set Reece apart from other candidates for office.²⁴ Reece reportedly never cursed at the men he led and told them that he would rather resign his commission than speak to them in the manner other officers spoke to him.²⁵

Reece maintained a degree of modesty about his experiences during the war. Although his military record appeared in most of his election propaganda, Reece omitted exceptional emphasis on his actions. An interviewer in the early 1920s pointed out that Reece maintained the honor of being the only known soldier to have received the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Croix de Guerre with Palm. “A fellow don’t deserve a medal for doing something anybody would do under the circumstances,” Reece reasoned. In another interview, he maintained the same analysis of his actions, recalling “That wasn’t anything so very unusual . . . You didn’t see it happen every day, but you did see it once in a while. The concussion of a bursting shell would simply knock a man over . . . Then he’d get up and start again.” The leadership experience Reece gained during World War I and his ability to place his actions in the greater context of the war proved invaluable in his congressional service and later appealed to top men in the Republican Party.²⁶

Demobilization of troops at the end of the war signaled a new problem for the American government. For many soldiers, morale became a problem because of long delays before they returned home. After unsuccessful attempts with drills and sports contests, the army offered to provide instruction to those wanting to learn basic skills, such as reading and writing, as well as subjects ranging from elementary grades to college level. Approximately one and a half million troops took advantage of this by enrolling in courses at universities in both Britain and France while still on duty with their units.²⁷

Reece capitalized on this opportunity and headed to the University of London School of Economics in March 1919. The journey itself proved somewhat precarious, evidenced by Reece’s handwritten memo to the Board on Claims and Lost Personal Property at the end of April for lost

items, including a uniform, shoes, boots, bed roll, blankets, etc. totaling \$263. Reece secured a pass allowing him to travel at his own expense outside the university and visited much of Britain. These journeys permitted him to see the effects of the war on Britain's people and countryside.²⁸

Following the armistice, the American military placed a temporary halt on all promotions. While in London, Reece asked his former commander Colonel Lewis about the status of his promotion based on his actions at Bois d'Ormont and Lewis' recommendation letter. In a prompt response, Lewis wrote a letter from Paris describing Reece as "a gentleman of the highest character . . . As regimental commander it was my intention at the first opportunity to recommend Lieut. Reece for promotion to Captain and later to Major." The war's end and Lewis' absence from the division prevented him from following through with his intention. Lewis added that "I consider Lt. Reece to have been deprived of well won promotion."²⁹ Despite his commendable military record, six years passed before Reece received the promotion he felt duly deserved.

After more than a year abroad with the army, Reece returned to the United States. On June 23, 1919, special orders relieved him from duty and ordered him to proceed to Brest, France, as the Port of Embarkation for return to the United States. Keeping in line with progressive ideals, the camp hospital certified Reece "free from vermin of any sort and all Venereal and Infectious Diseases" and allowed him to proceed to Camp Dix, New Jersey. On July 26th, he wrote to the Commanding General to request a formal discharge from the military in order to assume a position at NYU as director of one of its schools. He explained that remaining in active service would force him to "assume financial and professional risks" that he preferred to avoid. He offered to remain on the discharged list of officers or to go into the Reserve Corps. Two days later the 50th Infantry accepted his request and honorably discharged Reece from Camp Dix and the army on August 16, 1919.³⁰

Reece returned to an America consumed by suspicion and fear. The United States recognized the provisional government established in Russia in March 1917, but in November another revolution replaced that government with the Soviet regime. The American government refused to recognize Soviet Russia and severed all diplomatic ties. Anarchists and other radical groups within the United States hoped other areas of the world would duplicate the Soviet revolution. In February 1919 a series of strikes spread across the United States, and the following April authorities discovered thirty bombs mailed through the postal system to people hostile to the anarchist movement. In June a series of bombs exploded across seven cities that targeted those involved in suppressing radicalism, including

Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. These bombings spread fear across America as all radicals—anarchists, communists, the International Workers of the World—became grouped together as a “red menace.”³¹

The response to these attacks led many Americans to view radicals and immigrants as threats to security. The Attorney General authorized a series of raids in late 1919 through early 1920 in hopes of discovering those responsible for the bombings. A number of radicals faced arrest and deportation for possession of weapons or suspicion of radical affiliation. As the anarchist movement within the United States slowly declined, focus shifted to the growing communist movement. The initial terror associated with the Red Scare declined as post-war prosperity increased, but communism remained in the minds of many, including Reece, as a subtle but constant threat to American democracy. This idea may have explained in part why Reece maintained his affiliation with the military through the next ten years. On May 27, 1924, the Adjutant General appointed him Major, Staff Specialist of the Officers Reserve Corp of the Army of the United States for the duration of five years. The next March, he received appointment as Lieutenant Colonel, Specialist in the Army, to enter active duty when specially ordered.³²

Ten Years in Congress is Long Enough for Any Man

One political party dictated the politics of most southern states after the Civil War. Once the Democratic Party overthrew Reconstruction governments, it presented a solid front to the nation on most issues, especially those regarding race. According to the historian V.O. Key in *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, the South may not have been an important region in national politics, but politics were important in the South. With one-party dominance, the primary election became the main contest in the southern states because the party nominee rarely faced opposition in the November election. In *Dixie Demagogues*, the authors describe the primary election as an entertainment and “an exchange of personalities in which the pot calls the kettle black.” Within the Democratic Party, rival factions fought for the nomination on local levels and sought the support of the regional political boss.³³

Tennessee followed this political model of the South with one important exception. The Democratic Party dominated the central and western parts of the state in the years after the Civil War, but the eastern part of the state remained loyal to the Republican Party both during and after the war. E.H. Crump of Memphis emerged during the first half of the twentieth century as the local Democratic political boss, and as a result of

the limited number of Republicans in the state, he often garnered enough support from his district and those surrounding it to elect his favored candidate into state office. An informal agreement between the Republican and Democratic leaders of the state allowed East Tennessee elections to proceed unhindered by the Democratic Party in return for little or no opposition from Republicans in the senatorial and gubernatorial campaigns. This permitted East Tennesseans to elect Republicans from the First and Second Districts to the United States House of Representatives on a consistent basis. The political scientist William C. Havard characterized Tennessee politics as a double one-party state.³⁴

After he left Fort Dix, Reece returned to serve as Director of the School of Business at NYU and maintained contact with men from the war and his home state. Reece wrote to Sergeant Alvin C. York to request a meeting when he returned to Butler in early April and provided York with a copy of his war record as incentive for the meeting. Reece also corresponded with his former commander, Captain Lewis, to discuss the actions of the 102nd Infantry on the day of the armistice. Although he lived in New York, Reece sustained a political connection with Tennessee. He announced approval that Sam R. Sells, the Republican congressman from the First District, insisted that delegates from the district support Major General Leonard Wood at the National Convention.³⁵

Unhappy with their current Republican representative, a delegation from Tennessee visited Reece in 1920 and asked him to consider running for Congress on the basis that Sells had agreed to step aside if a war veteran wanted his seat. Shortly thereafter, he requested a leave of absence from NYU to return to Tennessee. This move seemed uncharacteristic for a person who had spent his life in academia, but in later interviews Reece disclosed that at the age of thirteen he told his brother Jim that he had decided to go into public office. He wanted to help people, but he had to wait for the opportune moment to enter the political sphere. Reece worked with the American Legion while at NYU, but this petition presented his first opportunity to hold a political office. After a local newspaper announced Reece's candidacy in the primary for the Republican nomination for the First Congressional District seat in the House of Representatives, tempers flared between Sells and Reece. When the two met to discuss their candidacy, Sells denied stating he would resign his seat. He then reportedly looked at Reece and asked, "Reece, who are you? You haven't any chance to win against me."³⁶

The primary elections in East Tennessee involved heated campaigns for the few Republican positions left in the state. In 1920, when Reece decided to campaign for the representative seat from the First District,

Sam R. Sells had occupied the position for ten years. Playing off the report that Sells would step down if a real soldier desired his seat, Reece supporters touted his military record, recapped the actions that won him many medals, and used a snapshot of Reece in uniform as his campaign portrait. When Sells denied making the statement and refused to withdraw from the primary, Reece's supporters began to attack Sells' legislative record and his credibility. In a sworn statement published in local newspapers, Reece accused Sells of stating that he would pick his own successor to office and it would not be Reece. According to the statement, Sells declared that no man could break his organization and that his eventual retirement from office did not mean a political enemy would succeed him.³⁷

The contest between Sells and Reece presented the first challenge to a primary nomination and the first real election campaign in East Tennessee in a number of years. Reece stated he hesitated to run initially, but after hearing that Sells would not run if a soldier entered the primary, he acquiesced. After local papers printed a number of attacks against Sells for his promise to step aside for a real soldier, he acknowledged the comment but stipulated that at the time he had a Major Caleb Hathaway in mind as his successor. Sells informed Reece that a candidate needed more than simply a military record to qualify for office.³⁸

Sells' decision to remain in the race for the primary nomination prompted a new wave of attacks against his suitability for office. A large circular distributed to residents of Greeneville, Tennessee, listed a number of reasons why Sells should not be the choice of the people. The circular reminded residents that Sells' position as a manufacturer meant votes against the interests of the farmer, the laborer, and the poor. It asserted that Sells lacked a critical understanding of educational issues that Reece, a former teacher, possessed. One of the most damaging accusations was that Sells made more money during World War I than he had during his entire life, whereas Reece volunteered to fight. Representative of the intense religious nature of the area, a campaign pamphlet titled "Can Anything Good Come Out of Sodom" attacked Sells' military record, cited court records that showed Sells had been charged with public intoxication and disorderly conduct, and accused him of infidelity.³⁹