

Virginia Foster Durr

Virginia Foster was the daughter of an Alabama Presbyterian minister. She was born on August 6, 1903, in Birmingham, AL. As a child she shocked her elders by rebelling against the treatment of her black friends. However, she accepted segregation and was forced to question her beliefs for the first time at Wellesly College. As a sophomore she was faced with a “rotating tables” policy that she didn’t want to participate in. This policy required students to eat meals at tables with a random group of fellow students, including African Americans. After protesting this policy, Virginia was told she would either have to abide by the policy or leave school. She decided to stay.

She was forced to leave the college her junior year because of financial difficulties. After returning to Birmingham, AL, she met her future husband, attorney Clifford Durr. After their marriage, they moved to Washington, D.C. Durr was gradually converted to more liberal beliefs through her associations with her husband’s New Deal colleagues. While her husband worked for President Roosevelt, Virginia joined the Woman’s National Democratic Club. This contact with political activists ignited her own activist tendencies. She found the poll tax, which was particularly used on African Americans and women, very offensive. She worked very closely with liberal political leaders to gain the necessary support for legislation, which resulted in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the dismissal of the poll tax. The Durr’s became involved in the anti-Communist hysteria surrounding the congressional hearings supported by Senator Joseph McCarthy and Senator James O. Eastland. Virginia was subpoenaed as a witness on supposed Communist influences in Eleanor Roosevelt’s circle. Because of the stress, Clifford suffered a nervous collapse.

Virginia became a founding member of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare. Because of Virginia and Clifford’s controversial positions on issues of race, many white people in Birmingham didn’t like them. That didn’t stop them. They continually tried to stop institutionalized racism. The Durr’s provided legal advice to blacks and also supported the Freedom Riders and the Voting Rights Act. In December 1955, Virginia and Clifford Durr bailed Rosa Parks out of jail after she was arrested in Montgomery for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on one of the segregated buses. Shortly after, Virginia helped to organize the Montgomery bus boycott. She also wrote many essays on the civil rights struggle. Her first was on the trial of a Ku Klux Klan member in Alabama.

In her later years, Virginia supported nuclear disarmament. Durr had a very active life. Her career work included: Civil rights activist, relief worker during the Great Depression, lobbyist, campaign worker for Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace, and participant in *Eyes on the Prize*, a PBS television series on the civil rights movement. After having an influential career and raising four daughters, Virginia Durr died on February 24, 1999, at the age of 95. An obituary in the London *Times* noted that “to the end of her long life [Durr remained] the soul of indiscretion, inveighing against those she regarded as sinners while canonising those she considered soulmates.”