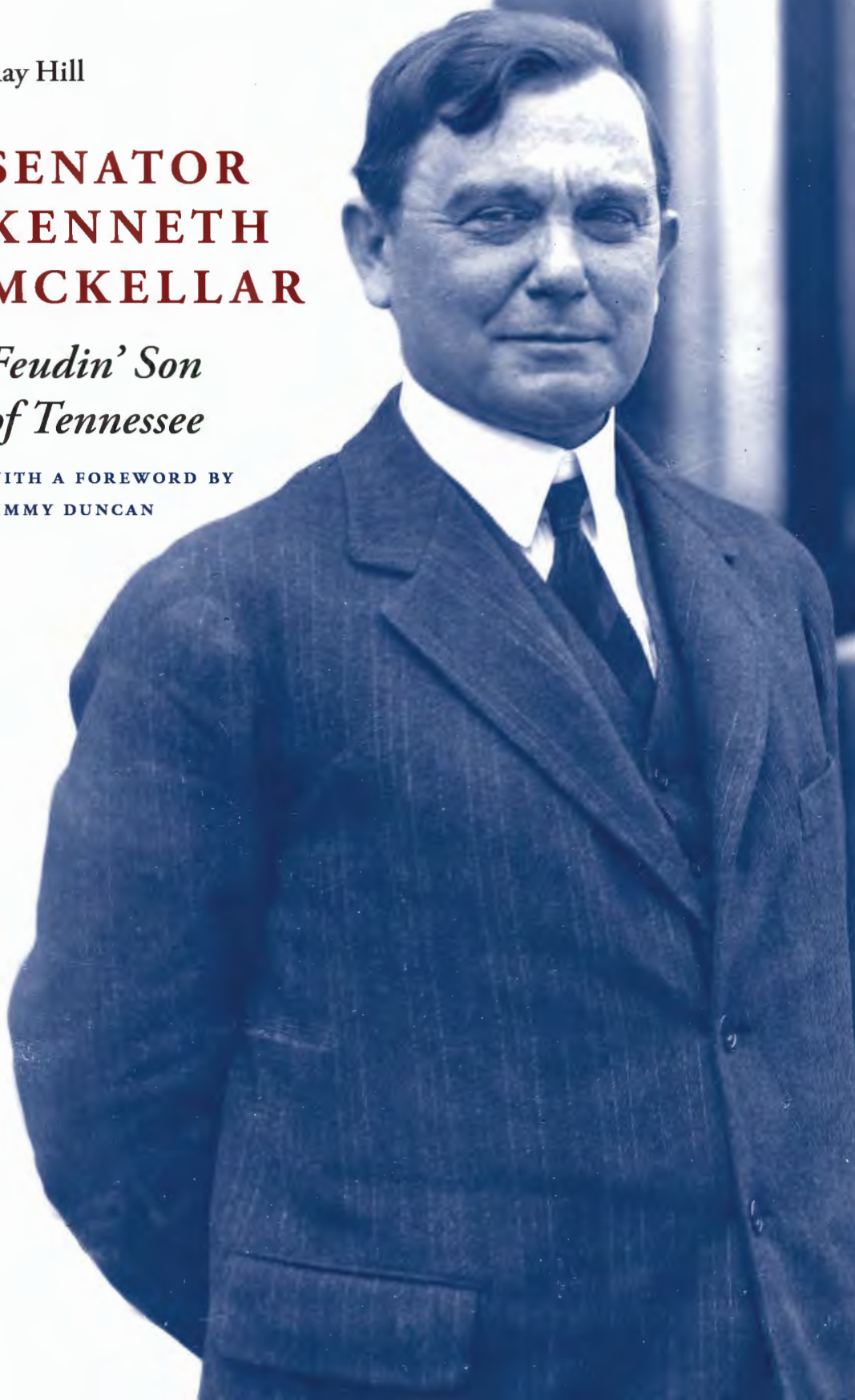


Ray Hill

**SENATOR
KENNETH
MCKELLAR**

*Feudin' Son
of Tennessee*

WITH A FOREWORD BY
JIMMY DUNCAN



SENATOR KENNETH MCKELLAR



SENATOR KENNETH MCKELLAR

Feudin' Son of Tennessee

Ray Hill

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For my friend Steve Hunley with thanks.

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FOREWORD

If I am not Ray Hill's biggest fan, I know I must be very close. Every week for thirteen years, he has written the most interesting political column in this nation.

Ray writes his column for the *Knoxville Focus*, a print and online publication that is now frequently observed as Knoxville's conservative newspaper.

Ray writes in a colorful, fascinating, but always informative and detailed way about former US governors, senators, and representatives. He has developed fans and a loyal following all over this country.

This great and talented writer has now turned from his unique lengthy column format to producing a book-length study about the life and career of Tennessee's longest serving member of Congress, Kenneth McKellar.

McKellar served as a United States representative from 1911 until 1917 and as United States senator from 1917 until 1953. He twice served as President Pro Tempore of the Senate for a total of six years. He reached the pinnacle of power as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

There is a famous story that when President Roosevelt told McKellar the nation needed to build a powerful new weapon—the hydrogen bomb—to end World War II that McKellar told him: "Fine Mr. President. Where in Tennessee do you want to build it?"

Historians, political junkies, and anyone who loves Tennessee will love this new book by Ray Hill. I think it will be rated as one of the greatest political biographies of all time.

John J. "Jimmy" Duncan, Jr.
US Congressman from Tennessee's
Second Congressional District, [Ret.]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in US senator Kenneth D. McKellar began while I was a very young man. For more than forty years I have been collecting memorabilia, notes, conversations, and information about Senator McKellar. This book is the result of a lifetime of interest in Kenneth McKellar.

I owe a debt of gratitude and thanks to several people who have made this book possible. It likely never would have happened had I not agreed to write a weekly column for the *Knoxville Focus*, and I have to thank the publisher, Steve Hunley, who had the foresight to realize there are many people out there who still enjoy reading about history. Thanks to my friend Dean Pope, who is a brilliant legal scholar and may well be a better writer than he is an attorney, which is a mighty big compliment. Dean's dissertation on Senator McKellar was the bedrock for my research. I owe a debt of thanks to many of the senator's former staffers who took the time to put up with an inquisitive young man and never seemed to tire of answering endless questions about a chapter of their life that was long past at that point. Chief among those was the late Janice McKellar, widow of the senator's brother Don, and a McKellar staffer for more than two decades. Patient, kind, and profoundly direct, Janice was the very epitome of a southern lady, ahead of her time. Well into her eighties Janice could still type a perfect multi-page letter without error and still enjoyed cruises and traveling. Other McKellar staffers who put up with my endless questions were the senator's last administrative assistant, W. R. Davidson, and personal secretary, Mrs. Sara Ward. Other McKellar secretaries who talked or corresponded with me were Sarah Hale and Frances Wilson. I enjoyed a long correspondence with them, and I still am anguished over the house fire in 2002 that took those letters from me.

A special word of thanks to Mrs. Donna McKellar Easter, Janice and Don McKellar's daughter and my friend, who has always been helpful and supportive.

Thanks to G. Wayne Dowdy, archivist extraordinaire, writer, and notable Tennessee historian for encouragement and support, as well as reading the early chapters of this book.

There are no words to adequately thank former congressman John J. “Jimmy” Duncan who has indeed been so kind about my weekly column. Congressman Duncan’s foreword is typical of his generosity to his friends, and I am deeply grateful.

Thanks to the late Brainard “Lon” Cheney who I spoke to several times and who I still recall told me he could sign the senator’s name as well as could McKellar himself.

Many thanks to Dr. Bill Lyons and Ms. Laura Clemmons who trudged through a rugged manuscript.

I want to thank the wonderful and dedicated professional staff at the University Press of Tennessee: Scot Danforth, the able and insightful executive director; Thomas Wells, who held my hand throughout the trying time my book was being evaluated for publication until its publication; the kind and diligent Jonathan Boggs who edited the book; and Ms. Katie Little, who was so extraordinarily helpful as a very fine copyeditor. UT Press is lucky to have such professionals who work so hard to put out a good product for readers. All the folks at UT Press kindly overlooked my many quirks and faults and still made this a better book. Thank you for your hard work.

As Senator McKellar noted in his own book, *Tennessee Senators: As Seen by One of Their Successors*, my fondest wish is that this biography of a truly remarkable Tennessean will be enjoyed by the people of Tennessee especially.

Ray Hill

Knoxville, Tennessee

2024

INTRODUCTION

KENNETH DOUGLAS MCKELLAR was the first person ever to be popularly elected to the United States Senate by the people of Tennessee. When McKellar beat former governor Malcolm Patterson for the Democratic nomination, one columnist in the Atlanta *Georgian* wrote the Tennessean was “the radiantly rising sun in Tennessee politics . . . heralding a brighter, better and happier day.” The *New York Times* thought Kenneth McKellar “a young man of decided ability and high character” and wrote his nomination should “be applauded by those who wish Tennessee well.”¹

“Honest, aggressive, shrewd, partisan, temperamental, spiteful, unfair, unscrupulous, ruthless” were all adjectives used to describe Senator McKellar at various times throughout his long career, biographer Robert Dean Pope wrote.² McKellar’s career ran parallel to every major political event throughout Tennessee’s history for almost five decades, and no US senator from the Volunteer State has been as involved in the fabric of the political doings. One journalist who long covered McKellar’s career wrote, “Bitterly criticized by some, he answered his critics in kind, survived the criticisms, and followed the path of his own selection and in his own way.”³

Once inside the Senate, McKellar perfected the constituent service operation that would be emulated by many members of Congress from Tennessee. That same attention to detail and keeping a sharp eye on the folks back home made McKellar enormously popular with the people he represented. To this day McKellar remains Tennessee’s longest-serving US senator, with few peers in his political prowess. He remained in office due to his diligence, hard work, and dedication to the people he served. McKellar was also the first United States senator to win six elections by the votes of the people.

Serving alongside seven different presidents, one of whom served three full terms in office, Kenneth McKellar’s service encompassed many of the most significant events of the twentieth century, including both world wars and the atomic age. A lifelong bachelor with no real hobbies, McKellar was highly focused

on his job. Janice Tuchfeld McKellar, the senator's sister-in-law and a longtime staff member, once told an interviewer, "I suppose being a bachelor, his office was his home and his constituents were his family. Their letters meant much to him individually and collectively. Their sorrows and their joys were his griefs and his happiness."⁴

McKellar once summed up his political philosophy in an exchange on the Senate floor when one colleague referred to "McKellarism." "If loyalty to my friends and showing appreciation for their friendship, if seeing that my state receives its portion of public favors so that our people may progress and advance with other sections, is 'McKellarism,' as has been charged, I gladly meet the issue." "If what I have done is McKellarism, I stand for McKellarism," the senator thundered, and indeed he did.⁵ The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* huffed the actual definition of "McKellarism" was being "loyal to your friends and smit[ing] your enemies with unshirted hell."⁶

At a dinner given in the senator's honor by the Tennessee Society of Washington, McKellar told the audience, "When I raised my hand in the Capitol for the first time and took the oath of office as United States Senate, I decided then and there to consecrate my mind, my strength, my time and my soul to the service of the people of Tennessee and since then I have endeavored upon every occasion to do so."⁷

During the desperate days of the Great Depression when hunger and want stalked people in the tens of millions, McKellar became a one-man cottage industry in pushing through federal projects, realizing the resulting jobs generated would help feed families and provide a good living for Tennesseans. It was said McKellar had more people on the federal payroll than any other member of Congress, and that was likely true. The senator also aided Tennessee businesses in securing work, having controlled federal patronage during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

During the time McKellar represented Tennessee in the US Senate, eight other men held the Volunteer State's other seat. He was a leading advocate for women's suffrage and worked hard to have the Tennessee General Assembly ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. McKellar was also one of the first senators to hire a woman as his chief of staff.

Representing what was then considered a "Southern" state, McKellar benefitted from what some called the "South's Revenge," or the seniority system: with longevity came seniority and with that came choice committee assignments and growing influence. Senator McKellar climbed the seniority ladder,

eventually chairing the Senate's relatively unimportant Post Office and Post Roads Committee, yet that perch gave the Tennessean great sway over the building of post offices and filling them with personnel throughout the State of Tennessee. It also provided McKellar jurisdiction over federal roads in the United States.

McKellar also rose through the ranks of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, through which every federal dollar expended by the government passed. The late Senator Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma, who served for twenty-four years with McKellar, wrote a short memoir in which he stressed the importance of both longevity and seniority and what it meant to the folks back home. Thomas highlighted McKellar as an example, noting the Tennessean was simultaneously president pro tempore of the Senate and chairman of the Appropriations Committee. Thomas credited McKellar with keeping the Tennessee Valley Authority afloat, through which more than \$1 billion in federal funds flowed during McKellar's tenure—an astronomical sum for the time. "In fact Senator McKellar has secured so many projects and institutions for his state that his colleagues wonder where he finds sites for the dams, reservoirs, steam generating plants, research laboratories, and innumerable factories located in Tennessee," Thomas wrote enviously.⁸

One can still see the fingerprints of Senator McKellar across Tennessee today in the TVA, Oak Ridge, and the countless post offices and courthouses constructed during the 1930s. The senator allocated \$100 million for the Air Engineering Center at Tullahoma, and he was also active in building public parks for the people of Tennessee, the most notable being the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. McKellar's extraordinary abilities to secure funds out of the federal government for his state and people resulted in new bridges, football stadiums, roads, airports, and dams. In fact, most of the dams built under the auspices of the Tennessee Valley Authority were a result of McKellar's ability to finagle money and shepherd it through the complicated appropriations process.

McKellar's acquisitiveness for Tennessee is illustrated by the most oft-told story about the senator, often recited by his successors, including Howard Baker and Lamar Alexander. The language changes with the retelling, but the essence is that President Franklin Roosevelt once called the senator to the White House. When he arrived, McKellar took a seat and listened. "Can you hide 2 billion dollars in the budget without anyone knowing what it is for?" Roosevelt asked him. McKellar, without missing a beat, replied, "Why, of course I can Mr. President, but where in Tennessee are we going to hide it?" The dollars in

question were used to fund the Manhattan Project, and that very story is even included on the *Explore Oak Ridge* website today.⁹ When all was said and done, the Senate Appropriations Committee appropriated \$2.6 billion for the project.

Even the modern legislators who have achieved high rank in Washington have never exercised the kind of influence wielded by Kenneth McKellar. Allen Drury, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Advise and Consent*—considered to be one of the superlative novels ever written about the United States Senate—began his lengthy career as a cub reporter in Washington, DC, during the early 1940s for the Associated Press. Then in his twenties, Drury kept a diary that later became *A Senate Journal*, and one of the central characters was Kenneth McKellar. In the beginning, Drury thought McKellar was a sleepy old man and none too shrewd, an assessment he quickly came to realize was wholly inaccurate. Drury wrote McKellar was the single most influential member of the Senate and the entire body would do an about-face to save the Tennessean’s feelings. “Seventy-five years old and the toughest in-fighter in the senate, shrewd, tricky, unscrupulous and ruthless . . . a feudin’ son of Tennessee,” Drury wrote.¹⁰ “Nobody really wants to make the old man angry, so everybody scurries around trying to find an out for him. With a good 40 votes on the floor against him, he was deferentially asked if he would ‘consider a compromise.’ Such is the power of McKellar.”¹¹ And Kenneth McKellar used that power not for himself, but for the people of Tennessee, time and again. Even the most powerful of presidents had to contend with him: when he was against the construction of the Douglas Dam, not even Franklin Roosevelt could do anything about it until McKellar acquiesced.

To get to the United States Senate and stay there, McKellar had to beat some of the most prominent political figures in Tennessee. He became so formidable that Congressman Gordon Browning admitted years later when he considered a race against the senator in 1934, he could not obtain a single commitment of support by one prominent Tennessean.¹² It was indicative of McKellar’s personal popularity that he was renominated again in the 1946 Democratic primary, which was tantamount to election, by defeating an opponent who had quite nearly beaten his junior colleague four years earlier and despite the fact that McKellar did not once come home to campaign.

McKellar’s influence was strengthened even further when he pulled in harness with political leader E. H. Crump of Memphis. The McKellar–Crump alliance thoroughly dominated Tennessee’s statewide politics from 1932 to 1948, though McKellar’s friendship with Crump has been too often profoundly mis-

understood. Paul Coppock, who covered politics for the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* from 1929 until 1952, decried the myth that McKellar was merely Crump's political lieutenant, describing the two men as equals, personal friends, and political partners. In an oral history with Dr. Charles Crawford, Coppock recalled:

Kenneth McKellar was something special. He was an ally and an associated power with Mr. Crump rather than a part of the Shelby organization. He had gone into politics before Mr. Crump and had built his own following, especially through the years of personal services to people all over Tennessee. Each of them was inclined to feel under obligation to McKellar that superseded the support of Mr. Crump when the two disagreed. This position of McKellar was almost never understood by distant newspaper men who were inclined to refuse correction about it.¹³

Professor William R. Majors, outstanding Tennessee historian, noted, "Very clearly McKellar was no lackey of the Memphis boss or even a lieutenant. The relationship between the two was an alliance of dynamic political leaders complimenting each other, but each was relatively independent within his own sphere of influence."¹⁴ Indeed, Crump did not openly support McKellar in the 1911 special election for Congress, and he was too preoccupied with his own legal problems in 1915 and 1916 to do much for McKellar when he was running for the United States Senate. Never once, in fact, did McKellar win an election based upon the returns from Shelby County.

Too often what has been written about Kenneth McKellar has been based upon the mistaken notion of the senator being a satellite of Crump. But while Crump's domain of Shelby County was entirely his, alliances inside the legislature did not translate into the Memphis Boss ruling other parts of Tennessee. It was said that Senator McKellar knew more Tennesseans personally than any other living man. It was also said that there were few families in the state for whom the senator had not done a favor. It was McKellar who had built a formidable statewide organization, not E. H. Crump. "But the most astute observers always said, however, 'Crump needs McKellar as much as McKellar need[s] Crump.'"¹⁵

McKellar's legacy has also been tainted by his feud with TVA director David Lilienthal: many interpreted McKellar's disdain for Lilienthal as opposition to the Tennessee Valley Authority as a whole, which is untrue. Opposition to Lilienthal was not opposition to the Tennessee Valley Authority; McKellar's

“annual spring offensive” to make TVA accountable to Congress was criticized at the time, but today many think it was necessary. There was also the fact that no Tennessee politician could have survived politically being against TVA; the people of Tennessee would have refused to tolerate it. When McKellar died, the *Kingsport Times* published an editorial entitled, “The Old Order Passeth,” which set the record straight: “Forgotten too is the fact, which some people will find it difficult to believe, that Kenneth McKellar was the man who is as much responsible as any one man for the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority. This fact has been smothered by another fact: his long and bitter feud with David Lilienthal. For this he has been labeled an enemy of TVA. Actually, he was no enemy of TVA.”¹⁶

The *Times* reminded its readers it had fallen to McKellar time and again to secure hefty appropriations to keep the TVA going, often in the face of fierce opposition from a combine of Republicans and conservative Democrats in Congress. Indeed, McKellar once stated the greatest disappointment of his long congressional career was President Roosevelt’s asking Nebraska senator George W. Norris to sponsor the legislation creating the Tennessee Valley Authority. That bestowed upon Norris the title McKellar coveted: “Father of the TVA.” McKellar said, “The biggest job is getting the appropriations.”¹⁷ Senator McKellar had to settle for being the “Rich Uncle” of the agency instead.

Albert Gore, McKellar’s successor in the Senate, acknowledged the senator was frequently successful in acquiring appropriations for the TVA where the Tennessee House delegation had been unsuccessful. It was a part of Senator McKellar’s most fundamental philosophy, to get as much as he could for the people of Tennessee. “I do not think the Senator should intimate that I am taking this position because my State is receiving certain benefits to which it is entitled,” McKellar said in an exchange on the floor of the Senate. “If the Senator did not, I should think he was not doing right by his State. . . . I think it is a worthy position for the Senator to take to get whatever is proper for his State.”¹⁸

Far from being a reactionary or a conservative, the senator was repeatedly hammered by his opponent in the 1922 Democratic primary for his “socialist tendencies.”¹⁹ The *Columbia Herald* sounded the alarm, stating McKellar was “rapidly becoming one of the most dangerous radicals in the Senate.”²⁰ Meanwhile, the *Knoxville News* hailed the senator, writing “the faith of the people of Tennessee in the progressivism of Senator Kenneth McKellar has again been justified by his uncompromising stand against the Underwood private lease bill through which the Power Trust is attempting to grab Muscle Shoals.”²¹

The senator's progressive views would again be the source of a strong challenge inside the Democratic primary in 1928.

McKellar was a stalwart of the New Deal, one of the first members of the United States Senate to espouse the candidacy of then-Governor Franklin Roosevelt for the Democratic presidential nomination. McKellar was also one of the twenty-two senators who refused to buckle under when FDR's attempt to enlarge the US Supreme Court was being sent to the table.

Senator McKellar supported Roosevelt's foreign policy, especially during the difficult days when isolationism was at its crest in the country and in Congress. McKellar's service in the Senate, even at an age when most men had retired, was marked by his industry and astonishing energy. The senator was also relentless in his pursuit of his goals, whether it was intervening with a Washington bureaucracy on behalf of a widow, locating a new installation, or pursuing a legislative goal. During the Second World War, McKellar saw to it that Tennessee received its share of war industries, bases, and camps. W. R. Davidson, McKellar's last administrative assistant, liked telling the story of McKellar, then in his eighties, walking into a meeting full of military brass who were ready to discuss their budget request for the coming fiscal year. An elaborate map of the United States had been hung and colored pins placed in those states where projects were scheduled to begin. The senator peered at the map and the long shadow of a frown began to appear. Scowling and gesturing with his cane in the general direction of Tennessee on the map, McKellar gave the generals one last baleful glare and walked out without a word. The generals and their aides remained puzzled until Davidson pointed out there was not a single pin embedded in Tennessee. The meeting was rescheduled, and the senator was much pleased to see a colored pin stuck into Tennessee on the map.²² It is said that the reason Fort Campbell straddles both Tennessee and Kentucky is precisely because nobody in the military wished to antagonize either Senator McKellar or Alben Barkley, the majority leader of the Senate who hailed from the Bluegrass State. The best course seemed to be to placate both.

During his tenure, McKellar also had much to do with the development of modern highways. When he first went to the House of Representatives, McKellar was chagrined the roads were frequently impassable and he had to ship his brand-new Packard automobile to Washington. McKellar was the father of the Federal Road Act of 1916 and was instrumental in getting President Woodrow Wilson to support it. By the time he left Congress, the country was on the cusp of building the modern interstate highway system.

No matter was too big or too small to escape Senator McKellar's attention, especially if it mattered to a Tennessean. The *Nashville Banner's* longtime Washington correspondent, Jesse Cottrell, once witnessed McKellar sitting patiently through a "long and trying session" that was coming to a close. Cottrell remembered, "It was far into the night and that last rush to clear the calendar was on." Senators were irritable, "weary and worn," but through it all one kept a quiet vigil: Kenneth McKellar. Finally, knowing the right moment had come, "The Tennessee Senator arose quietly from his seat, called up a little bill that meant nothing to his colleagues. But some Tennessean all these long months had been awaiting this hour, when he knew McKellar, at one moment or another, would find an open sesame for action."²³

Senator McKellar had been a successful attorney before his election to the House and he remained a crafty inquisitor throughout his life. It was McKellar who dealt FBI director J. Edgar Hoover the worst public embarrassment of his long career. McKellar got Hoover to admit, under questioning, that the vaunted director had never arrested anyone. The Tennessee senator was also instrumental in sinking President Herbert Hoover's nomination of Judge John J. Parker to sit on the US Supreme Court. Furthermore, Senator McKellar was recognized as one of the leaders of the campaign to carry the Volunteer State for Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York, a Catholic and "wet" who was opposed to prohibition. McKellar urged Tennesseans not to "vote in prejudice" and tried to reassure them Al Smith was a "sincere and devout Christian."²⁴

Always a proud and partisan Democrat, Senator McKellar was one of the most caustic critics of President Herbert Hoover and his administration. McKellar was also one of the leading congressional critics of Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon. McKellar was a friend of the farmer, the small businessman, labor, the veterans, widows, and orphans, but he was always suspicious of big business, and the senator was especially wary of private power companies. Defending the working man on the floor of the Senate, McKellar once demanded to know, "Why should any man begrudge prosperity to the laboring man, who brings about prosperity for all others?"²⁵

Kenneth McKellar was an active legislator, wily in knowing how to get things done in the Capitol. A pleasant companion unless provoked, he had a volcanic temper when incited, and with the Tennessean, any fight went the length of the bar and out into the street. McKellar's penchant for fighting brought him a set of boxing gloves courtesy of the Golden Gloves, and one spat on the Senate floor

became infamous due to national columnist Drew Pearson accusing the Tennessean of pulling a knife on a fellow senator, a charge the senator vehemently denied. In fact, one of the most famous speeches McKellar ever gave inside the Senate Chamber was that denouncing the muckraking columnist as a liar. With that speech, even Pearson himself acknowledged McKellar had “hit the high watermark of gorgeous invective.”²⁶

McKellar was jealous of his prerogatives as the United States senator from Tennessee, and he guarded them carefully. Few men in the Volunteer State possessed his keen political sense, and the senator was well able to look years ahead for opposition or an opponent emerging on the horizon. Yet during Senator McKellar’s last term in the Senate, he was subject to memory lapses. One Memphis businessman recalled visiting the senator in Washington to discuss the tax on margarine, something McKellar had opposed repeatedly. The businessman was surprised when the senator looked at him and asked, “How long has this been going on?”²⁷

Still, McKellar maintained a 92 percent record in answering roll call votes even in his eighty-second year and made one last great, albeit brief, speech on the Senate floor. Written in pencil on stationery from the Mayflower Hotel where he lived in Washington, DC, McKellar gave his speech from his desk on the front row, where he “supported himself against his desk.” “His voice broke now and then, and his typed sheets shook in his hand” while he spoke to a hushed Senate Chamber who accorded the Tennessean the respect he had earned. McKellar spoke of the need of unity in the country. “It is no time for dissention,” McKellar told his colleagues. “It is no time to permit ourselves to get worked up over lesser questions and lesser matters. To my mind, it is our supreme moment and our greatest test.”

“The questions are . . . shall the greatest Constitution ever written and the greatest government ever devised by man and the freest and most successful and the most prosperous people on earth, shall we remain as presently set up or are we to be taken over by the Communists, who believe in neither God nor man? I pray to a just God that the answers to both questions [are] no,” McKellar said softly.²⁸

Kenneth McKellar, like any mortal being, was hardly perfect. The senator was plain-spoken and sometimes extraordinarily blunt, tended to see things in terms of black and white, and could be vindictive, but he was also honest, able, and devoted to the people of Tennessee. There was no pretense with Kenneth McKellar. No Tennessean in modern times has accrued the power and influence

he held at his zenith, but the senator used it to make sure Tennessee and Tennesseans got their fair share of the good things the federal government had to offer. By the time his course was run, even Kenneth McKellar's political enemies acknowledged he had always fought for Tennessee and her people and what he thought was right.

Chapter One

POLITICAL BEGINNINGS

KENNETH MCKELLAR was forty-two years old when he was first elected to the House of Representatives in a 1911 special election to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Congressman George Washington Gordon. His rise to political prominence had come despite the fact he was not a native of Memphis or Tennessee, having been born in Dallas County, Alabama in 1869. When McKellar was born, Ulysses S. Grant had not yet taken the oath of office as president of the United States. When McKellar left Congress in 1953, another famous general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was about to assume the presidency.

Like many Southern families just after the Civil War, the McKellars found their finances precarious. The future senator's father suffered from a debilitating illness, and his sons had to work very hard to make ends meet. The exact nature of James McKellar's illness is foggy; many McKellar descendants know of his bad health but are unsure about the exact nature of his condition. Kenneth did say later he had watched a close family member suffer from an addiction to alcohol. He himself remained a teetotaler for most of his life, but his younger brother Don would battle a fondness for alcohol. Whatever James McKellar's illness, it left his family to fend for itself. Their hardship was something Kenneth never forgot, and it was an experience that helped him empathize with the less fortunate for the rest of his long life.

With the help of his older brothers, Kenneth managed to attend the University of Alabama, where one of his fellow students was John Hollis Bankhead II, son of a United States senator from Alabama and a future member of the Senate himself. (McKellar would later serve with the senior Bankhead as both a congressman and a senator. The younger Bankhead and McKellar would serve in the United States Senate together from 1931 until Bankhead's death in 1946.) McKellar earned a bachelor's, a master's, and an LLB degree from the University of Alabama, all cum laude, and for much of the rest of his life proudly wore his Phi Beta Kappa key on a watch chain that usually hung across his vest.

After graduating, McKellar arrived in Memphis with his new law degree, exactly fifteen cents in his pocket, \$600 in debt to his older brothers, and wearing a suit that had seen far better days. He only intended to visit, having arrived with the desire to spend some time with his brothers before heading to California, where he anticipated opening a law office. His older brother Robert, a successful executive with one of the railroads, convinced McKellar to remain in Memphis for a while. He promised that he would get Kenneth a train pass, which would enable him to travel for free, if he chose to continue his journey on to California.¹

McKellar soon found he enjoyed Memphis—he liked the social life where his relatives were well established in the community. The young attorney accepted an offer to join the law firm of Metcalfe and Walker, starting at twenty-five dollars per week. It was not long before McKellar began his first flirtation with politics, campaigning for Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, then known as the “Boy Orator of the Platte,” in 1896. McKellar had left the Metcalfe firm the year before to join Colonel William Carroll and James Chalmers in practicing law. McKellar eventually became a partner, and the firm of Carroll, Chalmers, and McKellar was prosperous. After Chalmers died in 1898, the firm was known as Carroll and McKellar.

Colonel Carroll was a highly esteemed member of the bar and quite well connected, both socially and politically. One of his friends was another well-heeled lawyer, Thomas B. Turley. Turley would become a United States senator from Tennessee, but more importantly to McKellar, Turley was the father of a beautiful young daughter, Louise. McKellar became profoundly enamored with Louise Turley and intended to marry her. Apparently, McKellar put off his formal proposal to take a holiday in Europe. As recounted by Robert Dean Pope in his dissertation on McKellar, the future senator was delighted to receive correspondence from Louise Turley while overseas. “If I had not been about as deeply in love with her before as I well could be, I am sure I would be now,” McKellar confessed to his mother.²

Returning home to Memphis from his European vacation should have been a pleasure for McKellar, but he was shocked to discover that Louise had become engaged to another man in his absence. For the rest of his life, McKellar credited his failure to win Louise’s hand as the reason for his lifelong bachelorhood.³ But McKellar was a good sport about losing Louise, and years later, he delighted in showing her daughter around Washington, DC. Much to the horror of Louise’s daughter, the senator good-naturedly recounted the reasons

he was still unmarried, chief among them being her mother having married another man.⁴

While McKellar modestly described himself as “a plain lawyer,” he became a very successful one. After practicing law for almost twenty years, he had earned about \$300,000, the equivalent of nearly \$7,000,000 today. Success allowed McKellar to purchase a house at 591 South Lauderdale in Memphis, which he shared with his widowed mother and two sisters who never married.⁵ After the passing of his mother and sisters, McKellar sold the house and maintained an apartment in the Gayoso Hotel, where he resided until his death in 1957.

Although very successful and financially well-to-do, especially for the standards of the time, McKellar could be careless with his personal finances. Shelby County Trustee E. H. Crump was embarrassed to send reminders to McKellar that his property taxes were overdue. McKellar also apparently signed notes for friends and relatives who did not meet their obligations. Fortunately, McKellar’s carelessness with his personal finances did not extend to his legal or political affairs.

Amid finding success as an attorney, McKellar also found the time to become involved in civic affairs and politics. McKellar was a presidential elector for William Jennings Bryan in 1900 and a member of the Jackson Club, which was an organization dedicated to reforming local government. The Jackson Club was comprised of mostly young men who were attorneys, many of whom were politically ambitious and desired to reform the government of Memphis. It was through this organization that McKellar first came to the notice of many Memphians. He devised a program incorporating many of the desired reforms, which the Jackson Club urged legislative candidates to support, and by March 1905 the city charter of Memphis had been amended.

Three years later, following the 1908 gubernatorial election, Tennessee’s Democratic Party—always fractious—blew apart. Incumbent Governor Malcolm Rice Patterson was seeking renomination, and former United States senator Edward Ward Carmack challenged him. The two men had a long history, and the dislike between them was palpable. Carmack had first been elected to Congress by defeating Patterson’s father, Colonel Josiah Patterson. Later, Malcolm Patterson was elected to Congress once Carmack vacated the seat, having been elected to the US Senate. Ousted from the Senate in 1906 by former governor Robert L. Taylor, Carmack decided to challenge Patterson in the Democratic primary. The chief disagreement between Patterson and

Carmack was the issue of prohibition: a sharply divisive issue across the country, but especially in Tennessee. Governor Patterson was an outspoken “wet” and favored allowing local governments to decide whether to sell alcoholic spirits and beer. To the fury of prohibitionists, Patterson also enjoyed drinking himself, perhaps sometimes to the point of excess. Naturally, the “drys” were outraged by the governor’s attitude and considered Patterson to be a tool of the liquor interests. The two factions fought a ferocious brawl for the heart and soul of Tennessee’s Democratic Party—one that was not only a clash between the urban and rural interests, but also the finale of a feud that went back decades. Carmack’s defeat of Patterson’s father had been a close race—so close in fact that Josiah Patterson had filed a contest in the US House of Representatives. Carmack’s lawyer in that contest had been Kenneth D. McKellar.

McKellar himself had related how Carmack had come to the Carroll and McKellar law office to ask Colonel Carroll to represent him. Carroll, who did not believe Carmack would be seated by the Republican majority in Congress, declined to represent the prospective congressman, saying he did not propose to damage his own reputation as a lawyer. A dejected Carmack turned to leave when Colonel Carroll suddenly shouted for him to return. Gesturing to McKellar, Carroll offered McKellar’s services, saying the young lawyer had no reputation to lose by representing Carmack.⁶ McKellar worked hard to help Carmack win the contest before the House of Representatives and knew Colonel Patterson was much more likely to find favor with the Republicans. (Patterson had been a “gold” Democrat while Carmack had espoused the cause of “free silver,” as had Democratic presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan. President William McKinley and most Republicans believed in the sanctity of the gold standard, so it was presumed many GOP congressmen would be more favorably disposed to Patterson’s cause.) McKellar deftly managed Carmack’s legal battle, and Carmack, an excellent orator, supposedly made the best speech of his life in the well of the House. To the astonishment of many, Carmack was seated, which ended Josiah Patterson’s political career.

As Carmack was being turned out of office in 1906, Malcolm R. Patterson was elevated to the governorship. Still a relatively young man in 1908, Carmack had not given up hopes of a political comeback and he wagered it all on the gubernatorial race. Both men were good speakers and had long been popular in Tennessee, and both conducted aggressive campaigns for the nomination. Carmack’s supporters wore buttons on their lapels that featured a picture of him with the slogan, “Shall the machine or the people rule?” It was a close contest,

but Governor Patterson managed to beat back Carmack's onslaught with majorities in Tennessee's urban and suburban areas.

A journalist by profession, Carmack returned to his former occupation when Luke Lea, owner of the Nashville *Tennessean*, offered him a job as editor of the newspaper. Stung by his defeat, he used his facile pen and colorful language to relentlessly denounce Governor Patterson and his associates. Carmack had an impressive command and apparently limitless supply of invective, with which he liberally doused the governor and his friends. In fact, he proved to be so good at ladling out editorial abuse, it led to his eventual demise. At least one prominent associate of Governor Patterson, Colonel Duncan B. Cooper, strongly objected to being tortured in print by the fiery editor. Carmack and Cooper, at one time, had been friends: Colonel Cooper had given Carmack his first job at the Nashville *American*, writing editorials. Obviously the friendship had not endured, and after having been bathed once too often in Carmack's vitriol, Colonel Cooper sent word to the editor he would not suffer any further insults.

Carmack paid no heed to the Colonel's warning and continued to attack Cooper in print. Carmack's friends were concerned enough to urge the editor to be wary, and they were right. Carmack himself, aware of the impact of his editorials, had taken the precaution of arming himself as he traversed Nashville. Unfortunately, it was not enough to save his life. Carmack happened to meet Colonel Cooper and Cooper's son Robin on a Nashville street on November 8, 1908. All of the men were armed, and suspecting he was about to be assassinated, Carmack drew his pistol and opened fire. Carmack wounded Robin Cooper slightly, but young Cooper proved to be a much more accurate marksman and shot the editor three times, hitting him in the shoulder, head, and heart. Carmack fell dead into the gutter of the Nashville street.

Even in 1908 a shootout in the streets of Nashville between political enemies was not a commonplace occurrence. The reaction to Carmack's murder was swift and terrible. The shooting raised a firestorm across Tennessee, and the prohibition forces proclaimed the former senator was a martyr to the cause. The Coopers were arrested, indicted, and tried for murder. But any satisfaction Carmack's friends and fellow temperance supporters felt with the conviction and sentencing of Colonel Cooper and his son was fleeting. The Tennessee State Supreme Court upheld the conviction of Colonel Duncan Cooper, but reversed Robin Cooper's conviction and sent his case back for retrial. The prosecutor in the Robin Cooper case requested that charges against young Cooper be dismissed, and the trial judge granted the request. If that were not bad

enough, Governor Malcolm R. Patterson announced that he had pardoned Colonel Duncan Cooper—a proclamation that stunned Tennesseans.

Patterson's pardon of Colonel Cooper inflamed Carmack's friends and supporters to new heights of fury and indignation. Even those politically friendly to Governor Patterson were astounded by his brazen use of his executive clemency. The legislature quickly passed prohibition and voted to erect a statue of the fallen Carmack, which still stands in front of the state capitol today. Ultimately, Patterson's pardon of Cooper further split the already hopelessly divided Democratic Party in Tennessee. Division and hatred still had not healed when Patterson sought a third two-year term in 1910. The opposition he faced was so intense that he finally withdrew as a candidate despite having been renominated. It was readily apparent that Patterson could not be reelected, and Democrats feared a loss to the Republicans in the general election.

Those fears gained traction when a slate of incumbent justices of the Tennessee State Supreme Court announced they were running for reelection as "Independent" Democrats, further dividing the already splintered party. Referring to themselves as the "free and untrammled" judiciary ticket, the Independent Democrats forged a coalition with Republicans that made them a formidable force against the regular Democratic Party candidates sponsored by Governor Patterson. Frantic, Democrats sought a candidate to ward off defeat. Their eyes landed upon United States Senator Robert Love Taylor, a former three-term governor and perhaps the most popular Democrat in Tennessee.

McKellar recalled in his book *Tennessee Senators* that he was arguing a case in court when he was interrupted by a delegation of men who asked to see him down the hall. McKellar replied he could not go as he was in the middle of trying a legal case. The sitting chancellor said he had no objection and would wait while McKellar talked to the gentlemen. When McKellar approached them, he was met with "thunderous applause" and was told the Shelby County delegation to the state Democratic convention had endorsed him for governor. McKellar recounted he had never been so astonished in his life.⁷ He asked the delegation if they would not instead endorse Senator Taylor for the governorship, but they refused. McKellar then switched tactics and asked if the delegation would name him as chairman, which they did. McKellar hurried back to his office and sent a telegram to Taylor, asking the senator to meet him in Nashville before the state convention. Senator Taylor replied he would be happy to do so and added there would be enough delegate votes to nominate McKellar for governor at the convention.

The conference with Bob Taylor did not go well, and he initially refused to be a candidate for governor again. He pointed out he had been governor three times already and wished to remain in the Senate. Taylor was insistent that McKellar run, pointing out that the Memphis lawyer was new to politics and had little political baggage. Several other delegations, especially in West Tennessee, had been instructed to support McKellar and he very likely could have been nominated. But McKellar was also shrewd enough to realize he did not command the respect and affection that Bob Taylor did from the people of Tennessee. McKellar knew it would be a hard contest for any Democrat. After the meeting, he proceeded to round up influential Democrats he believed would urge Taylor to accept the gubernatorial nomination, and they returned later that night to implore the senator to make the race. Eventually, Taylor's loyalty to the Democratic Party trumped his personal wishes and foreboding, and he agreed to run against little-known Republican candidate Ben W. Hooper of Newport.

McKellar recalled that he took six weeks off from his law practice to campaign for Taylor and spent as much as \$5,000 of his own money promoting the senator's candidacy—a princely sum for the time.⁸ Unfortunately, it was all for naught, and nobody was more surprised by his defeat than Bob Taylor. Senator Taylor died a few months after the election, and many Tennesseans believed he had succumbed to a broken heart due to his rejection by the people of Tennessee.

If losing the governorship to the Republicans was not bad enough, another defeat lay in store for Tennessee Democrats. The legislature was due to elect a senator in 1911, and the division between Democrats in the General Assembly was especially glaring as Republicans and Independent Democrats once again combined, as they had in the 1910 general election, to elect a "fusionist" senator. Democratic Senator James B. Frazier wanted a second term, but when it became clear that he could not muster enough votes, the Shelby County delegation in the General Assembly nominated McKellar for senator. McKellar's entry into elective politics was surprisingly casual, and considering his involvement in local questions and the Democratic Party, perhaps inevitable, but his first bid for office was almost accidental—at least according to McKellar family legend.

Memphis was represented in Congress by seventy-four-year-old George Washington Gordon, a former Confederate general who had been superintendent of the public schools in Memphis. Despite his age, Gordon had only first

been elected to Congress in 1906, and the former general was ailing when he returned from Tate Springs, where he had hoped to recuperate. His condition continued to deteriorate at the resort, and his physician advised him to return to Memphis. The congressman arrived at the home of his daughter, Mrs. H. B. Martin, "seriously ill." A doctor accompanied him back to Memphis while his family promptly summoned their physician, as well as a nurse. Gordon had been in failing health for some time and absent for much of the last session of the House. The following day, August 9, 1911, the *Tennessean* reported the congressman was dying. Tennessee newspapers detailed his steady decline,⁹ and George Washington Gordon died that same day.

As always, when an incumbent officeholder dies, the speculation about a successor begins before the body is cold. Family lore had it that McKellar was vacationing when Gordon died. Gordon had not only been a general in the Confederate Army, but also one of the first members of the original Ku Klux Klan. When he passed, the leading candidate to fill his seat was Tom Looney. One of McKellar's brothers wired him while he was on vacation, informing McKellar of Congressman Gordon's death and the groundswell of support for his candidacy if he would run for Congress. McKellar wired back a terse telegram from the golf course: "Not interested."¹⁰

When supporters of a prospective McKellar candidacy reported he had no interest in running in the special election, Looney boasted McKellar was afraid to run. Possessing a quick and fiery temper, McKellar immediately wired one of his brothers to announce his own candidacy for Congress along with instructions to pay the filing fee. McKellar cut short his vacation and returned to Memphis to begin his campaign to represent Shelby, Fayette, Hardeman, and Tipton Counties in the House of Representatives.¹¹ At least that was the story recounted by the senator and family members afterward. History reveals that McKellar was quite interested in going to Congress. Having been seriously promoted as a candidate for governor and the United States Senate, he was clearly interested in holding public office.

McKellar became the first entry into the Democratic primary to succeed the late Congressman Gordon on August 14, 1911. He made his announcement in a speech to voters inside Tennessee's Tenth Congressional District, saying he would resign his post as chair of the committee overseeing the selection of a candidate and would seek a primary election. While McKellar made his candidacy official, supporters of former governor Malcolm Rice Patterson were busy promoting Patterson's candidacy. The former governor remained a highly

controversial figure even inside his own Democratic Party.¹² The McKellar–Patterson rivalry would continue for more than a decade.

Shortly after McKellar announced his candidacy, Tom Looney declared his own. Looney’s announcement followed a statement issued by Malcolm Patterson stating while he appreciated the urging of his friends, he would not run for Congress. Almost as soon as Patterson’s statement hit the newspaper presses, Looney made his candidacy official. At least initially, Looney seemed to be a formidable candidate. He had carried Memphis in the 1910 primary against Congressman Gordon and had received a large vote in the three counties outside of Shelby. Tom Looney stated he, too, favored a primary election to select the Democratic nominee for the US House of Representatives.¹³

The Tenth District Democratic Committee met on August 22, 1911, at the Shelby County courthouse, and true to his word, McKellar resigned as chairman. The committee called for a primary election to determine the Democratic nominee in the special election to succeed George Washington Gordon; if no candidate received a majority of the votes cast, there would be a run-off election. The call for a primary election was hotly protested by Hugh Simonton of Tipton County, who was one “of the old line Democrats” who believed primaries had weakened the party and increased strife among its membership.¹⁴

The news media of the day noted Looney’s cordial ties to Malcolm Patterson and felt certain that Patterson would back his old friend in the primary election. They acknowledged McKellar as “one of the leading lawyers” in Memphis and a presidential elector for the Democratic national ticket in 1904. “McKellar, until the Taylor–Hooper race last year, had always been affiliated with the better element of his party,” one reporter noted. It was generally believed that temperance supporters would favor McKellar, especially since he had been the campaign manager for E. W. Carmack’s first race for Congress against Malcolm Patterson’s father, Josiah.¹⁵

By the time of the filing deadline, only McKellar, Looney, and C. C. Ogilvie had qualified to run in the special House election. McKellar quickly offered up his issues for the coming special Democratic primary. Stating he had been a lifelong Democrat and active in numerous campaigns for other candidates, McKellar endorsed the platform adopted by the Democratic National Convention in 1908, as well as that adopted by the state convention in 1910. He emphasized his support for reducing the tariff “on all articles which will reduce the cost of living,” especially on “woolen and cotton goods, shoes, meats, flour and all other articles that are consumed by all classes of people.” McKellar

pointed to the fact that such bills had been passed by the Congress, only to be vetoed by President William Howard Taft. If elected to Congress, McKellar pledged to help pass the bills once again. He stated his support for securing reciprocal trade agreements with other nations when it would be to the advantage of American producers and manufacturers, especially for Tennessee commodities like “cotton seed products, cotton goods” and all “produce and merchandise produced and manufactured in Tennessee and the other Southern states.” In addition, McKellar stressed his commitment to improving roads across the state, indicating his plans to obtain aid from the federal government. The candidate also ticked off other concerns to the people of Tennessee’s Tenth Congressional District, like flood control and river navigation.¹⁶

As McKellar campaigned for a seat in the House of Representatives, there were no mass media platforms candidates could use to reach masses of voters. There was no radio or television; indeed, many homes were lucky to have electricity. The only way candidates could reach the voters was through personal contact, mail, and newspapers, both dailies and weeklies. To that end, McKellar went to Bolivar, where he mixed with the voters. It was common at the time for candidates to do so when the circuit court was in session, especially when there was a big docket, and that drew both McKellar and his opponent Tom Looney. A few sparks flew as the two candidates spoke to the crowd and both emphasized their loyalty to the Democratic Party.

When McKellar noted his own activities as a Democrat, he pointed out that he had been the chairman of the 1910 Democratic state convention and had run the headquarters for Bob Taylor in Shelby County. McKellar drawled that he wondered where Looney had been, as he never saw him at headquarters during the Taylor campaign. Looney jumped to his feet and cried that he had never been asked to participate in the campaign, claiming it was a well-known fact that the old regulars had been kept “in the rear” of the gubernatorial contest in 1910. Looney insisted he had worked and voted for Taylor along with every other Democratic nominee for office and had been active in his own ward.¹⁷

The mayor of Memphis at the time was Edward Hull Crump. The *Commercial Appeal* reported friends of both McKellar and Looney had heard Crump was remaining neutral in the Democratic primary. Several of Crump’s “strongest supporters” had lined up behind Looney’s candidacy, while others known to be close to the mayor were backing McKellar. Evidently, a rumor was circulating in the political circles of Memphis that Crump had reached an understanding with Looney. The rumor was prevalent enough that the campaign managers of

both candidates had to assure supporters there was no truth to the claim.¹⁸ As Crump and his city ticket was up for election that November, he didn't wish to offend any of his own supporters and stayed out of the congressional race.

As the campaign wore on, McKellar sent a letter to Looney's campaign headquarters challenging Looney to meet him in debate. McKellar wrote he would be delighted to discuss the issues of the day "at such times and places as may be agreeable." At first, Looney immediately accepted the challenge. But after having more time to think it over, he changed his mind. A few days later, Looney announced he would decline McKellar's invitation to meet in joint debates across the Tenth Congressional District. After meeting with his backers and campaign committee, Looney sent another letter saying he felt debates would only stir up rancor and ill feelings among Democrats, something both candidates were trying to avoid.¹⁹

As the special election approached, McKellar was "so well known in the county that he had needed little introduction" to the voters. He had "served so excellently" as head of the Democratic Tenth Congressional District for the past eight years, and he knew and had worked with the most influential Democrats in the three counties—Tipton, Hardeman, and Fayette—that along with Shelby, made up the congressional district. Throughout the campaign, he reiterated his interest in one of the most important constituencies in Tennessee and the Tenth Congressional District: farmers. Having been born on a farm, McKellar was acutely aware of the difficulties farmers faced. One reporter opined that McKellar was "always strong in his appeals for the rural vote, for he appreciates the necessities of the farmers possibly better than they do themselves." McKellar was also determined in courting the votes of working people, which won him favorable mention from some press outlets. "Being of the people, he is for the people," one newspaper asserted.²⁰

The Democratic primary was held on October 7, 1911, a Saturday. Most observers felt the race would be close. As the ballots were counted, McKellar built a big lead in the returns. He showed surprising strength in many precincts where Looney was thought to be well ahead. McKellar carried both the City of Memphis and Shelby County, as well as Fayette County. Looney won in Hardeman County and barely won Tipton County by twenty-eight votes.²¹ Celebrating at his headquarters, McKellar expressed his profound gratitude and thanks to his friends and supporters. A deeply disappointed Tom Looney acknowledged his defeat relatively early in the evening and had nothing more to say that night.²²

Inside a solidly Democratic district and with only a token opponent in the general election, McKellar was a certainty to win election to the US House of Representatives. As the balloting in the Tenth Congressional District was a special election, McKellar's nomination received more notice statewide than usual. One Middle Tennessee newspaper observed, "On the whole, [McKellar's] political record, for a Memphian, has been exemplary."

"McKellar is an exceptionally able lawyer, a ready speaker, a gentleman of the most agreeable manner, approachable, courteous and considerate," the editor wrote, adding he believed McKellar was "admirably equipped for service in the National Congress and we have no doubt that his career there will be highly creditable to [Tennessee]. . . . He is young, enthusiastic and has a brilliant future before him."²³ McKellar's opponent in the general election was socialist W. A. Weatherhal; the Republicans did not even bother to nominate a candidate. On November 8, 1911, the voters of Tennessee's Tenth Congressional District went to the polls and elected Kenneth D. McKellar to Congress.

Before boarding the train to Washington, DC, to take the oath of office, Congressman-Elect McKellar gave an interview. McKellar demurred when asked about the promises made to the people of his district during the campaign, saying he preferred his people judge him by his actions as a congressman. When asked about the need for harmony inside Tennessee's Democratic Party, McKellar replied he did not believe the State Executive Committee should "abdicate" any of its existing functions, but rather should "get together at once" to resolve differences among the factions. "There can be no possible harm to the party that could arise from such a course," McKellar said. If the Democratic Party in the Volunteer State was going to come together, McKellar told the reporter, "There should be a conference and an exchange of views."²⁴

Upon his arrival in Washington, DC, McKellar confessed he found it "very pleasant" and concluded, "It looks like I shall like it very much."²⁵ McKellar believed the success of a freshman member of Congress was largely dependent upon interpersonal relationships, and he set out to try and meet the other members. McKellar also applied himself to learning the rules of parliamentary procedure, which he soon mastered. Before long, he found himself swamped with work; a heavy load of correspondence from constituents besieged him daily, and he confessed he was surprised by the number of entreaties from constituents asking him to sponsor private bills for them. At that time, there was no social security, and any pension for veterans, the disabled, or the gravely ill required a private act for the specific benefit of the petitioner. An active person,

McKellar brought terrific energy to his job and worked hard. He was as accessible to his constituents as possible at a time when long-distance telephone calls were almost prohibitively expensive for ordinary folks, but he readily saw most anyone who wished to see him and answered his mail promptly.

McKellar was also concerned about roads. When he was first elected to Congress, he set out to drive his new Packard automobile from Memphis to Washington, DC. Once he was outside Memphis, he was shocked and indignant to discover that the roads were barely passable. After several minor accidents and numerous flat tires, a very frustrated and angry McKellar decided to ship the expensive Packard by rail. It was an experience he did not forget, and by December 1911, he had determined to fight for a system of federal highways, which at the time did not exist.

McKellar was one of five new members of the House to be sworn in on December 4, 1911. When he went before the Speaker's dais to take the oath of office, Congressman Thetus W. Sims of West Tennessee accompanied him. Even before this day, McKellar had demonstrated his political dexterity and ability, and numerous residents of Tennessee's Tenth Congressional District saw themselves as prime candidates to serve as his secretary or chief of staff. McKellar was bombarded with more than forty applicants from every corner of the district wanting the post. Each applicant pressed his or her friends to provide testimonials and endorsements, some of which numbered in the hundreds.²⁶

Days later McKellar made the announcement he had decided to retain G. H. Rhodes as his secretary. A young newspaperman, Rhodes had been the secretary to the late Congressman Gordon. "After a great deal of deliberation, I have decided to make no change," McKellar said. "Mr. Rhodes is a splendid young man, and his past experience has well qualified him for the work. I found that there was a great deal of unfinished work in Gen. Gordon's office, with which only Mr. Rhodes is familiar, and I am sure it would not be wise to do anything else but retain Mr. Rhodes." Congressman McKellar was careful to note, "Mr. Rhodes does not wish to make the position permanent, but at my request, has agreed to assist me at least until I become familiar with the routine of the office."²⁷ McKellar was assigned to room 166 on the first floor of what later became known as the Cannon House Office Building. He decided to live at the historic Willard Hotel, at least for the time being.²⁸

The new congressman called on every member of Tennessee's congressional delegation, escorted to each member's office by his colleague Cordell Hull of the

Fourth Congressional District. McKellar also went to visit Oscar Underwood, a powerful congressman from Alabama who was chair of the House Ways and Means Committee. Having been born and educated in Alabama, McKellar had something in common with Underwood. Hull was also a member of the Ways and Means Committee and had discussed possible committee assignments for the new congressman.

The newly elected congressman was ready to work, and work he did. When a mine disaster occurred in Briceville, Congressman McKellar received a wire from Mayor Crump urging federal aid to assist the families of the miners killed in the tragedy.²⁹ Congressman Richard W. Austin of Knoxville introduced a bill appropriating \$150,000 for those widowed and orphaned by the mine disaster. This was a time when Congress did not routinely appropriate large sums for disaster relief. McKellar and Congressmen Joseph W. Byrns of Nashville went with Austin to see the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.³⁰ Around this time, McKellar also introduced his first proposed bill, which would create a commission to study the possibility of constructing six “great post roads” all beginning in Washington, DC, with at least one running through East Tennessee.³¹

It was a busy and exciting time for Congressman McKellar, but with Christmas approaching, he left for Memphis after Congress recessed. When he returned to DC in the new year, McKellar received assignments to the House Military Affairs Committee and the Railways and Canals Committee.³² Both were considered to be excellent committee assignments, especially for a freshman representative. It was as a member of the Military Affairs Committee that McKellar took his first trip as a member of Congress. Several committee members left for Key West, Florida, to inspect an “over the sea railroad built there” before boarding a battleship and sailing to Havana, Cuba. McKellar and his colleagues were to be gone for a week to ten days on the inspection tour.³³

As the years wore on, McKellar’s fight for a federal highway system continued. It was not until 1916 that Congress finally approved the Federal Aid Road Act. There was considerable opposition to spending so much money on roads, and even President Woodrow Wilson was dubious about excessive expenditures for federal highways. McKellar recalled he was at his office in the House Office Building when Alabama senator John H. Bankhead appeared in the doorway and sadly informed McKellar that the president intended to veto the highway bill. “Wilson thinks it’s unconstitutional. What does he know about the law? He’s not even practiced,” Bankhead growled. McKellar immediately

telephoned the White House, asking to see the president. He was told Wilson would be happy to see him and Senator Bankhead. Senator Bankhead was fearful of going to the White House, as he had not supported the president in the primaries when Wilson first ran in 1912. Bankhead worried that were he to go, it would be “like shaking a red flag at a bull.” The pessimistic senator lamented, “Even if he signs the bill, he’ll not give us any money. He’s a Scotch skinflint.”

Bankhead accompanied McKellar to the White House with great trepidation, and they were graciously received by President Wilson. Yet it wasn’t long before Wilson confirmed Senator Bankhead’s worst fears, stating that he did not believe using federal money to construct roads was constitutional. McKellar told the president that any money spent on developing a national highway system could easily be justified as necessary for the defense of the United States, which certainly was constitutional. He reminded President Wilson of a well-publicized event where a German submarine had docked in an American harbor so the captain and crew could go into town for lunch. The implication was not lost on Wilson. “I’m using every dollar we can for defense,” Wilson said. “Germany is going to make war on us, but I don’t want to say that publicly.”

McKellar pressed his point about the recent German submarine landing, asking Wilson what he would do should the Germans secretly deposit troops near Chesapeake Bay. “How do we know?” McKellar wondered. “They may have 10 or 100 or even 1,000 submarines. And we have no good highways or roads to send troops into that section.” Wilson, who had been pacing in his office, suddenly stopped and became still. “Why, that would make the federal highway funds legal. I’ve made a mistake gentlemen,” the president said. “That is part of our national defense. It would be constitutional.” He then asked just how much money would be needed to start a federal highway network. Senator Bankhead had been willing to agree to \$5 million to start, confiding to McKellar, “If he won’t go along, take four. If he won’t give four, take three, but if he offers only two million we’ll both tell him to go to hell.”

Senator Bankhead nearly lost consciousness when Congressman McKellar told the president he thought “at least” \$100 million would likely get the program underway, which would surely help create an expanded network of highways that would facilitate more rapid movement of both troops and material. McKellar recalled when he looked at the pale Bankhead, “I thought he’d have a fit.” The president resumed his pacing, murmuring, “That’s a very large sum.”

McKellar pressed his argument, replying that America was a very large country and would need “a very large number of roads,” concluding, “that will take a very large amount of money.”

Wilson finally agreed to \$75 million to begin with, leaving Senator Bankhead stunned. The Alabama senator remained silent as he and McKellar departed the White House until he was able to gather himself. Finally, he blurted out, “I thought you had thrown away everything when you asked for that much!”³⁴ The impact of McKellar and Bankhead’s visit to President Wilson would pay dividends over the decades. By 1952, the year before McKellar left Congress, the federal government had spent more than \$6 billion on roads.

In the years ahead, McKellar would dramatically change his district and state’s relationship with the federal government. Closer to home, he waged a lengthy battle to acquire a second bridge across the Mississippi River from Memphis to Arkansas. It was a hard-fought battle and there were more than a few times when it appeared all was lost, but McKellar not only skillfully negotiated the tedious legislative process, but also fought off a railroad that wanted to maintain its own monopoly. McKellar convinced yet a different railroad to pay for much of the construction of the new bridge and battled against crippling amendments proposed by Oscar W. Underwood, the leader of his own party in the House of Representatives.³⁵ It was the start of McKellar’s lifelong belief in bringing back projects and improvements for his constituents and state. He made no apologies for seeing to it his state received its fair share of public improvements and federal money, and in time, Tennessee would benefit greatly from McKellar’s penchant for obtaining favors for his state and people.

Another early legislative crusade for Congressman McKellar was his war on price fixing. McKellar proposed legislation that would make it a felony for any corporation or person to conspire to fix prices relating to foodstuffs. According to Senator Bill Frist in *Tennessee Senators*, Congressman McKellar was once served a spoiled egg for breakfast, which resulted in his attacking egg producers and cold storage interests. McKellar believed producers were creating an artificial scarcity of eggs, and many credited the congressman for his efforts to lower prices and help consumers.³⁶

McKellar’s maiden speech as a member of the House of Representatives pertained to a bill dealing with the military and the enlistment period for soldiers. Sponsored by Congressman James Hay of Virginia, the bill increased the enlistment time from three to five years for those soldiers who were non-commissioned officers. McKellar briefly defended the bill and claimed it would