



Faithful Servant

How an unelectable
Bible Boy became
a Jacksonville City
Council *force majeure*.

by Owen Holmes

WALTER COKER

A gray Hewlett-Packard copy machine sits on the desk of each Jacksonville City Councilmember. All nineteen, presumably, make fantastic copies. Only one has become an emblem of democracy.

One afternoon in October 2007, District 1 Councilmember Clay Yarborough unplugged his HP from the wall of his fourth-floor City Hall office. He lugged the machine, its tangle of wires and a fresh ream of paper down to the trunk of his Ford Focus. He got in the car, likely put in a CD of Christmas music — he keeps at least one on hand, year-round — and drove to Arlington's Craig Municipal Airport.

It was four months into Yarborough's first term, and the city was embroiled in a battle over the Jacksonville Aviation Authority's effort to extend the runway at Craig. It was only the latest in a decades-long series of pushes for the project. Despite JAA's string of defeats and subsequent promises to abandon the effort, the proposal had surfaced yet again. And again Craig neighbors fiercely opposed it on the grounds it would lead to increased air traffic and noise. Yarborough, who'd campaigned on a promise to fight any extension effort, had asked JAA for copies of any and all documents relating to Craig. The agency responded that it would cost \$14,000.

Rather than pay that amount, Yarborough opted for a DIY approach. With help from his council assistant and his trusty HP, he spent some three hours digging through boxes of documents, pulling about 200 pages of pertinent records and making his own damn copies.

"I mean, give me a break," he says, when asked about the incident — at one point pushing back in his office chair to give the machine a few loving pats. "We can all see they were trying to, I don't know if you'd call it 'denying' access, but just making for *unreasonable* access to the documents."

It wasn't exactly standing in the path of tanks in Tiananmen Square. But in the staid world of Jacksonville city politics, it was a dramatic act of civil disobedience — a very public retort to an agency that is accustomed to cordial noninterference from local officials. And it was just one instance of Yarborough's demonstrated willingness to challenge the status quo.

Defiance is the last thing political observers expected from the cherubic 28-year-old — a slightly built, heavily freckled fundamentalist Christian who still lived with his parents when he began his '07 run. But since taking office, he has shown a fearlessness that borders on recklessness, at least in the schmooze-centric world of local party politics. He's also devoted almost unprece-

ded attention to the concerns of his constituents. This is a guy who spends his free time driving around his district searching for potholes to report or attending Pizza Hut grand openings.

His passion has earned Yarborough the admiration of grassroots activists — even becoming, to his own puzzlement, a darling of local liberals. But it has also alienated party leaders, something political observers believe may prompt the local GOP to groom a more obedient sort to challenge him in the 2011 election. Political consultant John Daigle thinks an in-party opponent is a virtual certainty. "I'd be surprised if he isn't challenged by someone who's more of a [Republican] party player," he says. "[Yarborough's style] usually leads to not-an-easy run for re-election."

When the current batch of City Councilmembers was sworn in, on June 28, 2007, at The Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts, most of the lawmakers were accompanied onstage by their spouses. Yarborough brought his mother. He remains single, though he recently dated a girl for a few months. Before that, he hadn't had a girlfriend for two or three years.

I vaguely remember Yarborough — just the freckles, really — from time spent together in the high-school program at First Baptist Church, in the mid-'90s. (He doesn't remember me.) He's attended the downtown behemoth, which he refers to simply as "First," since his family moved to Jacksonville from Mobile, Ala., when he was four. He adds that he hopes his faith will be central to this article.

Clearly it's central to his self-perception, which is almost a stereotype of Southern fundamentalism. He keeps his red hair closely cropped, doesn't drink ("never had a sip of alcohol") and listens to contemporary-Christian radio. When I ask him what books he likes besides the Bible, there's no answer. As a City Councilmember, he's responsible first to the Lord, he explains pointing heavenward, second to the good people of District 1.

When Yarborough started campaigning, he'd just turned 25 and had never earned more than \$14,000 a year. With political experience limited to two terms on the virtually invisible Duval County Soil and Water Conservation Board, he got endorsements only from the Northeast Florida Association of Realtors and the local public employees union. (He also got a nod from downtown developer Tony Allegretti, who wrote on his blog, "He's like the Doogie Houser of local politics (young, not gay).")

At the same time, Yarborough's opponent, Cheryl Grymes, was a political veteran with strong name-recognition. A moderate Republican, she'd served on the Duval County School Board and the boards of many prominent city organizations. She commanded all other major endorsements as well as the support of powerful donors like Jaguars owner Wayne Weaver and Haskell Company Chairman Preston Haskell. In a race against an untested political naïf, she seemed like a shoo-in.

The outcome shocked everyone. Yarborough won with 57 percent of the vote. Daigle, who did some of Grymes' publicity, says Yarborough "just flat-out outworked her," that he "sort of wrote the book" on how to run a door-to-door, shoe-leather campaign. Yarborough acknowledges 14 months of hard work, but told me after the election that his win was simply "the Lord's will." More cynical observers chalked up his victory to support from First Baptist members — which is similar, in a way.

Since Yarborough's election, Daigle, who describes his own views as "a little left of center," says he's been "amazingly impressed" with the councilmember's political astuteness and courage in taking on Duval's good-ol'-boy network. "I have rarely seen a councilmember challenge the power brokers of their own party so early in their political career," he says. "Taking a stand like that could cost them seriously."

At 9 a.m. on a recent Monday, I meet Yarborough in his City Hall office. A map of District 1, which includes most of Arlington as well the Regency and Fort Caroline areas, is spread over a round table. Neat stacks of paperwork line his desk, business cards are stacked at the foot of a miniature Old Rugged Cross. A Thomas Kinkadee print hanging from an adjacent wall assures the Lord "stilled the storm to a whisper."

In fact, first thing Monday morning, a storm already needs stilling. Several constituents have been complaining that the palm trees the city planted at the intersection of Rogero and Merrill roads are too close together. Yarborough and his assistant, Angela Ryan, polled some district property owners and found they concurred. Yarborough plans to ask Public Works to remove half of the trees and plant them elsewhere.

Watching him thumb through the four-inch stack of legislation he'll vote on today, it becomes clear that, unlike most of his colleagues, Yarborough actually reads the things. He studied some bills at home on Friday night, others when he came to the office on Saturday. ("It's nice and quiet here over the weekend," he notes, innocently.) He then e-mailed Mayor John Peyton's policy director with questions about the legislation, so as to save time in committee. I ask if other councilmembers do that. "If they do, I don't know about it," he says.

A self-professed Reaganite — and not just because he and the former prez share a birthday — Yarborough knows he stands out as a small-government hardliner: "You'll probably see some 'no' votes from me today, which might interest you," he tells me in his soft Southern accent. I mention that libertarian U.S. Congressman Ron Paul, in light of his voting record, is known as "Dr. No." Yarborough gets



Shortly after Yarborough made his own copies rather than pay JAA \$14,000, he staged this photo of his effort. (The picture was actually not taken at JAA, but outside his City Council office. The sign was a prop.)

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Blogger Diane Melendez (left) relishes watching Yarborough cast the only "no" vote at council meetings. "Clay is definitely his own man, independent of any group," she says. "I wish we had more like him."

a kick out of this. "That's funny, because some of my colleagues call *me* that."

Diane Melendez, an Avondale Democrat, blogger and fierce City Hall critic, admits she was initially skeptical about Yarborough. She considered his youth and Southern-Baptist leanings liabilities, and expected him to be both easily led and politically misguided. Her concerns were reinforced when Yarborough asked Mayor Peyton to ban Folio Weekly from all city-owned property following a cover story on local S&M enthusiasts. (Yarborough called the publication "deplorable and incredibly tarnishing to the community.")

"After that," Melendez recalls, "I thought, 'Oh, boy.'"

But two years into Yarborough's term, Melendez gushes about his grasp of local issues and his sensitivity to constituents. Admiring his fiscal restraint, Melendez relishes watching him cast the only "no" vote at council meetings. "I'm thinking, 'Rock on!'" she says. "Clay is definitely his own man, independent of any group. I wish we had more like him." She laughs. "I wouldn't have thought I'd be saying this."

In conversation, Yarborough seems more policy adviser than politician. Asked whether he sees himself as a political rebel, he sinks into his big blue chair and grins. "You know, two years ago, when I started, I didn't think there'd be a continual butting of heads. I *want* to be liked." But, he adds, "at the end of the day, I would rather have done what is right ... than to have just gotten along with somebody."

Folding his hands, Yarborough stares at his office ceiling. "It gets very lonesome sometimes."

On most days, Yarborough wears a bright-colored polo and khakis around City Hall, but today he's put on a sky-blue Oxford and a red tie. At the 10 a.m. Rules Committee meeting, Chief Administrative Officer Alan Mosley is pitching the mayor's plan to borrow some \$370 million to finance the new courthouse and Better Jacksonville Plan road projects, some of which are stalled mid-construction. Mosley explains that additional fund-

ing is necessary because the half-cent sales tax voters approved in 2001 has generated less revenue than expected.

The argument persuades some lawmakers, but not Yarborough. "Borrowing in general gives me pause," he tells the assembled, before voting against all three bills. (On two, he's the only opposition.) He also votes against an emergency measure to spend \$168,078 for a "batting cage and picnic pavilion" in Jacksonville Beach, a controversial bill introduced by new Council President Richard Clark.

But he joins his colleagues in voting to allow an elderly couple to buy a small piece of city-owned park land adjacent to their property, on which kids are having sex (the husband informs the council he has "proof of it," but politely neglects to detail). Yarborough tells me later he wouldn't usually support a bill like this, but explains, "Some [issues] aren't as cut and dried, and that's one of them."

At noon, Yarborough heads across Hemming Plaza for lunch at Quiznos. He eats half of his steak sub, saving the rest for dinner. He dines out frequently, which he says means eating "lots of processed food." He's been watching his sodium intake. He also got a check-up recently, in response to the stress of his job. Despite the diet and the pressures, though, his doctor said he's OK.

Yarborough's interest in politics began behind the lens of a video camera. While studying TV production at Frank H. Peterson Academies of Technology (formerly known as Westside Skills Center), Yarborough took a summer job at the local public television affiliate and began operating the cameras at council and School Board meetings. Though he wasn't initially enthralled, he began to notice connections between the issues lawmakers addressed and the real world — he'd spot a road project he remembered the council voting on, for instance. After briefly considering running for School Board, he decided to aim lower and made a bid for the Soil and Water Conservation Board. Though he had no background in agricultural or environmental issues, the 19-year-old beat out his three opponents. His success might owe something to his slogan: "Who better to manage soil than Clay?," which hit him at 3 a.m., while he was sleeping.

Yarborough served the four-year term

while earning a business-management degree from the University of North Florida, then ran again, unopposed. Halfway into his second term, he decided to run for council. His family had moved to District 1 in 1999, and he'd gotten to know the area he says he now appreciates for its socioeconomic diversity. As the campaign progressed, he became worried voters might view as a liability the fact that he still lived with Mom (Micki, a retired legal secretary) and Dad (Bo, a longtime counselor at Landmark Middle School), so he moved into a Monument Road townhouse with two church buddies.

"I needed to move out anyway," he recalls, dryly. "I was 26."

Yarborough still lives in the townhouse. Most mornings he gets up at 4:30 and tries to spend at least 20 minutes reading the Bible and praying. "It makes the whole day go a lot better," he says. By 6:30, four days a week, he's left for the UPS hub in Northwest Jacksonville, where he's worked since 2004. (Being on the City Council is technically a part-time affair; members typically have other jobs.) For his first three-and-a-half years at UPS, Yarborough loaded delivery trucks; now he hires the guys who do that. The 30-hours-a-week recruiting position pays \$20,000 a year. During the holidays, the self-described "puny, little guy" puts on UPS "browns," he says, and helps drivers deliver packages.

After working until 3 p.m., Yarborough goes to City Hall to answer e-mails, make calls and study legislation "till I'm tired." That doesn't mean his day is over. According to his At-Large council colleague John Crescimbeni, a Democrat, "He walks out of here with stacks of paper and takes them home." Asked if that's normal for councilmembers, Crescimbeni responds, "Uh, no."

Yarborough prides himself on answering, whether personally or through his assistant, every e-mail he receives. (If this seems unimpressive, take a look at some of the e-mails.) Atlantic Beach resident Nick Strate, who in February e-mailed all councilmembers about the controversial Trail Ridge Landfill contract, confirms this anecdotally. "Clay was the only one who wrote me back," Strate says in an e-mail. "Considering how rarely I hear back from my representative, Art Graham, I thought

it was pretty cool to get even the slightest, non-automatically-generated communication from anyone on the Council.”

Land-planner and Arlington activist Lad Hawkins also praises Yarborough’s work, from helping to push through landscaping for the Wonderwood Connector to simply attending a meeting of the Greater Arlington Civic Council. “Just having a councilmember who actually listens to the people — there are a lot of them who don’t do much of that,” he says.

With an office next door to Yarborough’s, Crescimbeni can’t help but notice his colleague’s work ethic. “I thought I had a high standard,” he says. “I’ve found myself trying to keep up with his.”

It’s 2:15 p.m., and Yarborough is voting no again. This time, it’s the Finance Committee meeting. Boeing wants to lease an empty, ‘50s-era military warehouse at Cecil Commerce Center in a deal that includes \$243,600 in “rent forgiveness.” Yarborough casts a lone “no” vote, but later admits he misunderstood the bill — the rent forgiveness is in exchange for \$500,000 in capital improvements Boeing will make to the city-owned building. He says he’ll likely support the measure when the full Council takes it up.

If Yarborough is criticized for one thing, it’s taking fiscal restraint too far. He regularly opposes funding local nonprofits, community groups, even government entities (he didn’t intervene when funding for his political alma mater, the Soil and Water Conservation Board, was being cut from the ‘07-’08 budget). It’s to the point that Mayor Peyton told Yarborough, while the two were eating breakfast at San Marco’s Metro Diner in March, that he’s perceived as “anti-arts and anti-culture.”

Yarborough’s defense is conservative boilerplate — that the private sector should fund those efforts. He notes that he patronizes the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, whose

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performance of “Star Wars” music he and his brother attended last year, and he enjoys going to The Florida Theatre. But even in a flush economy, he doesn’t support city funding of cultural efforts. “I just don’t think that the city’s role is such that we should be funding nonprofits just to keep their doors open.” Asked what warrants government spending, Yarborough lists police and fire protection, roads and utilities. On a second tier are parks and libraries. Anything besides that, he says, “I’m usually pretty critical of.”

Yarborough’s conservatism isn’t just fiscal. He believes he has a duty to “guard the people we represent as far as social and moral issues.” And he stands by his desire to censure Folio Weekly. “I think it’s detestable content,” he says of the original sadomasochism story, grimacing.

Yarborough’s refusal to support the arts and social services hasn’t escaped the notice of those who otherwise admire him. Abel Harding, whose blog jaxpoliticsonline.com closely tracks city issues, says Yarborough has played “an invaluable role of independent thinker on the council,” but questions his choices in some matters. Daigle, the consultant, takes exception to the lawmaker’s votes against supporting nonprofits, even as he admires his independence. One Yarborough fan, speaking off the record, says that his draconian view of social service funding might stem from his youth and relative inexperience. He suggests the lawmaker serve on the board of one of the com-

munity groups, thereby getting a closer look at how they benefit the city.

In the meantime, however, Yarborough is unyielding. He recently fought the city’s effort to reopen a Fort Caroline-area community center because of the possibility that it would be used for at-risk youth, something he thought might “compromise the character and integrity of the neighborhood.” And he’s vowed to oppose Mayor Peyton’s proposal to cover a \$65 million budget shortfall with an increase in the millage rate unless all nonessential spending — i.e., social programs — is stripped from the budget.

It’s not just bleeding-heart causes that Yarborough won’t support, however. In a 16-2 vote, he joined Councilmember Kevin Hyde in opposing changes in the corrections officers’ pension fund that were supported by the Fraternal Order of Police. The pair’s opposition drew praise from the JaxPolitics blog, which called Yarborough and Hyde “the only two City Councilpersons unwilling to potentially bankrupt the city.” Blogger “g8rluvr” thanked the two “for taking a stand to protect Jacksonville’s future budgets. Thank you for being more concerned with your fiscal responsibilities as city leaders than with threats from a ‘man who would be king’” — a swipe at police union president Nelson Cuba, who was pushing the pension legislation. The blog post sparked a few comments: reader John Williams criticized Yarborough’s and Hyde’s decision, saying it would be their last term in office. Someone

named “Billy” [sic] replied, “If this is Clay’s last term, I will have lost faith in the council.”

If there was a single moment that separated Yarborough from ordinary politicians, it was at the beginning of the most recent Craig Airport debate. While the Jacksonville Aviation Authority has for years publicly maintained that the runway extension is necessary for safety, Yarborough contends that former JAA head John Clark admitted to him and a few others that the agency previously backed off the issue for purely political reasons. The comment was made in confidence, but Yarborough chose to make it very public. An hour after that intimate meeting, at a meeting of the full City Council, Yarborough summoned Clark to the podium.

Q: Mr. Clark, how long have you been at the Port Authority?

A: About 13 years.

Q: As long as you’ve been there, what has been the Authority’s motivation for wanting the Craig Field runway expansion?

A: Pilot safety.

Q: Isn’t it true that you told me just a few hours ago that in 2000 the Authority agreed to its pledge never to lengthen the Craig runway in order to curry political favors necessary to win unanimous council support for splitting the Port Authority?

A: [silence]

Q: Is that a yes?

A: Yes, that is what I said.

The moment stunned political observers. Not only had Yarborough forced Clark to make a damning admission — one that will forever undermine JAA arguments in favor of Craig expansion — but he’d done so by publicly humiliating a senior city official.

“It seemed to me that I was watching a skilled trial lawyer,” Daigle recalls, noting that

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the brief exchange moved the debate on Craig as few things have in the past 30 years. It was also a game-changer politically for Yarborough, an event that demonstrated both his political courage and his political blindspot. In retrospect, he says, it was clear the moment was politically costly. “That right there triggered many people to say I should watch out come re-election.”

Confrontation doesn’t come naturally to Yarborough. Nor, for that matter, does public speaking. Asked if he gets nervous during heated exchanges, he interrupts mid-question to answer. “Yes. Yes,” he says, shooting both index fingers at me. “I can answer that one real quick.”

And though his upcoming post as Floor Leader will put him in a central speaking role, Yarborough can still vividly recall the first time he spoke at a council meeting.

“You stand up and you can hear a pin drop and everybody’s eyes are on you, waiting to hear what you have to say — that was very intimidating.” He adds, “I’ve never gotten used to sitting in the council chamber, thinking, ‘This is comfortable.’”

It’s probably a good thing. Though the next City Council election isn’t for another two years, many candidates are already weighing their bids. Yarborough, who plans to seek a second term, tries not to worry about a challenger. “The majority of influential folks in town didn’t think I’d be here *this* term,” he observes. Still, he’s aware that there’s interest in seeing him gone. “There might be someone who might not pose as many challenges or threats,” he acknowledges.

Diane Melendez doesn’t think Yarborough has reason to worry, however. Given the political clout of First Baptist Church, she believes local Republicans will be hesitant to challenge one of its members. “I don’t think they would dare touch him,” she says.

Lad Hawkins agrees. As long as Yarborough continues to listen to his constituents, “I think he’ll get re-elected. A lot of people think money can buy elections, but I’m not one of them. Votes come from people.”

Councilmember Crescimbeni also believes Yarborough will see a second term, and offers a story that he believes distills the younger man’s political aptitude. In 2006, when Yarborough launched his campaign, he sought the support of John Crescimbeni, who’d served on the council in the ’90s and remained involved in the community. Yarborough asked him to lunch. Crescimbeni, who’d contributed to Yarborough’s opponent and openly supported her, blew him off.

Two years later, with Yarborough in office and Crescimbeni seeking to return to City Hall, Crescimbeni found the tables turned. Now it was he who needed help. So he asked Yarborough to lunch.

Crescimbeni wonders how his 20-something self would’ve acted if the situation were reversed — if someone who hadn’t given him the time of day later asked for his support. “I probably would have told him to jump in the river,” he admits.

Instead, Yarborough accepted the lunch invitation. The pair met for sandwiches at Woman’s Deli in LaVilla. By the time they left, Yarborough had written Crescimbeni, the Democrat, a check for a hundred dollars. □