

Iowa's Reluctant Place in the Magic Circle, 1946–1960

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TO MODERN IOWANS the name Roger W. Babson may not be familiar. But in the 1940s and 1950s his name was on the tongues and minds of many of the state's citizens for a good reason. In late 1946, Babson, a Massachusetts multimillionaire economist, futurist, and visionary announced his plan to relocate the nation's industry away from the coasts to the American Heartland, thereby protecting it from a theorized Soviet nuclear airstrike. His revelation sent a shockwave of a different sort rippling across the region. Midwestern boosters—already busy scrambling to attract post-World War II industry to their respective cities and states—suddenly saw in Babson's scheme a more lucrative option. Still more promising was Babson's declared intent to radically transform the Heartland from a collection of agrarian states into an 800-mile wide "Magic Circle" of industry and urbanity that would, given its inherent geographic isolation, be the only nuclear safe zone in the industrialized world. Babson's centering of his circle in Eureka, Kansas, ensured that the area would be, as he often opined, "the richest in times of peace, the safest in times of war." In Babson's new vision Iowa played a crucial role.¹

1. For the purposes of this essay, neither exact definitions of nor geographic delineations of the terms "American Heartland," "Midwest," "Great Plains," or any other label attached to that general region are of any consequence for several reasons. First, the primary sources cited here often used these terms interchangeably and without definition or consistency. And that reality makes this subject more, not less, interesting. Second, the various state-level booster

It is unknown whether or not Roger W. Babson visited Iowa, which is to say that no accounting of him doing so has surfaced. Given Babson's penchant for self-promotion, the fact that he never related a trip to the state means he probably never went there. Babson often stressed Iowa's membership in the Magic Circle's hexad of prime states which included Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri, the majority areas of Arkansas and Nebraska, and clippings from more peripheral states. He frequently included Iowa's economic and demographic contributions when touting the haven's aggregate statistics and carefully labeled and demarcated the state on promotional maps. In his nationally syndicated newspaper column, he mentioned Iowa equally to the other five states in the circle. It will be argued here, however, that if Babson had spent some time in Iowa he might have detected a state with a citizenry and culture potentially resistant to his designs. Although the ultimate failure of the Magic Circle is a foregone conclusion to the modern reader—the coastal factories were never relocated—many of the reasons for its failure are epitomized in the Iowa example.

Essentially, this is a study of conflicting state and regional identities in the heady years of the early Cold War era. Or to put it another way, this essay hopes to explain why many civic- and business-minded Iowans did not embrace Babson's Magic Circle even though it promised to deliver far more of the industry, wealth, and prestige those selfsame boosters had been seeking since World War I. The prime cause for Iowans' rejection of Babson's vision—that it conflicted with, rather than complemented, contemporary state identity and state-based post-WWII promotional campaigns—was echoed in other Magic Circle states. While the larger national and international realities that conspired to keep Babson's project stillborn have been well documented, the critical state-level causes have not.

campaigns mentioned here, *mutatis mutandis*, typified those comprising a bloc of states larger than any known interpretation of the "Midwest," etc. Similar campaigns were conducted by practically all interior (non-coastal) states lying between the Rockies and the Appalachians. And third, although the historiography of these terms may be fascinating, its voluminous track betrays a predictably subjective tone. In other words, this study in part hopes to explore, rather than pare down, that colorful subjectivity.

Babson's Magic Circle represents something of a Cold War crescendo in an incandescent debate over industrial and urban decentralization that is as old as the modern city planning movement itself. Considered by many the beginning of that movement, Ebenezer Howard's 1898 treatise, originally titled *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* but known better by its 1902 title, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, introduced the concepts of "garden cities" and "green-belts" which the author claimed were a mere retooling of similar decentralization efforts dating back to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516).² Though they have technically different meanings, "decentralization" was the preferred term for the planned spreading out of urban centers from the early 1900s until the end of WWII, but in the early Cold War era the terms "dispersal" and "dispersion" were commonly used to describe the same activity. The national government of the United States first began to take decentralization seriously during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal program of the 1930s and 1940s, which sponsored the construction of several "Greenbelt Towns" served up as models of living intended to cure societal ills associated with Great Depression era urbanity.³ The onset of WWII caused many in the federal government to now consider the defense-related benefits of decentralization to the extent that the subject "dominate[d] the discourse around urban and regional planning." The wartime impetus to decentralize urban centers to minimize damage from Axis bombardment naturally evolved into similar postwar federal efforts to mitigate a theorized Soviet nuclear airstrike.⁴

Judging from the map in Figure 1, the Magic Circle was in one sense an elegantly simple solution to a straightforward geo-strategic problem, but it was devised by a very complicated man. Rising from his lower-middle class roots in Gilded Age Gloucester, Massachusetts, Babson earned an engineering degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1898, but then

2. Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Cambridge, MA, 1965), 21.

3. David F. Kruger, *This Is Only A Test: How Washington D.C. Prepared for Nuclear War* (New York, 2006), 28.

4. Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton, 2005), 32.

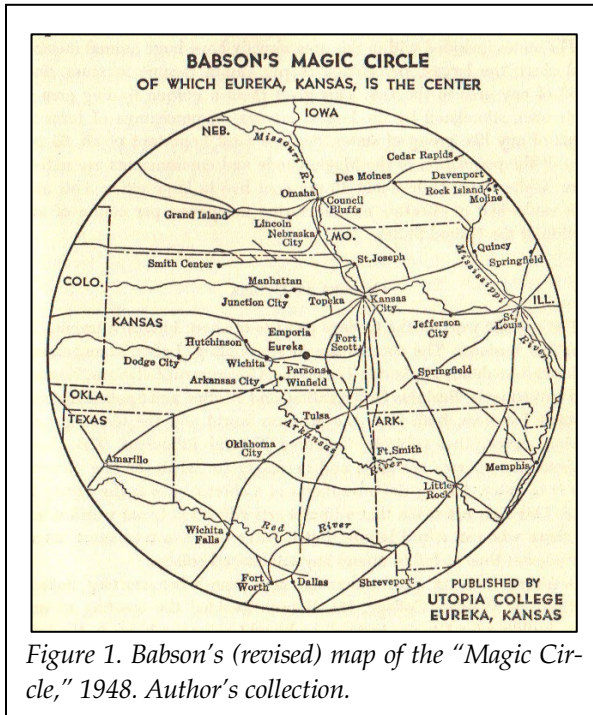


Figure 1. Babson's (revised) map of the "Magic Circle," 1948. Author's collection.

turned his attention to the business world. His Babson Statistical Organization, founded in 1904, became one of the nation's leading for-profit economic forecasting services and served as the cash cow for his later sundry ventures. During the apex of his notoriety, which lasted approximately from the early 1930s to the mid-1950s, Babson was nothing less than a national celebrity. Known primarily for his economic prognostication columns, he was eventually sought out by readers in hundreds of weekly newspapers. He was a prolific published author, as well, writing or contributing to over 40 works mainly dealing with business and religion. His 1909 self-published treatise on economics, titled *Business Barometers Used in the Accumulation of Money*, sold phenomenally well for decades under multiple editions.⁵

5. Roger W. Babson, *Business Barometers Use in the Accumulation of Money: A Text Book on Fundamental Statistics for Investors and Merchants* (Wellesley Hills, MA, 1909).

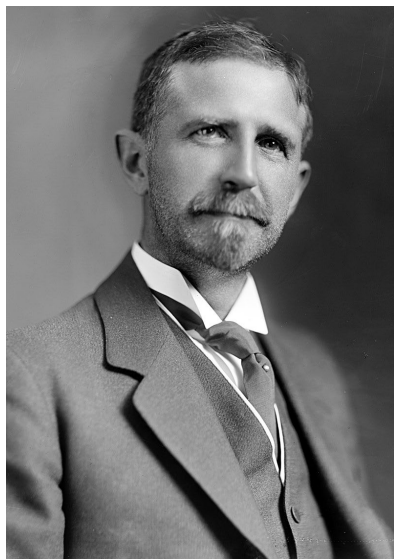


Figure 2. Roger W. Babson, the architect of the Magic Circle.

According to public reactions, Babson was a tall man at just over six feet tall, and he had striking, pale blue eyes. People were sometimes surprised by the high register of his voice, which had a generally disarming effect.⁶ When he spoke, many assumed he was from Boston—and they were very near the mark. His appearance has been likened to that of an eagle, with his plumage-like hair sticking out from under his black bowler hat and his hawk-like nose completing the look. His meticulously groomed mustache was in the style of “Boston Blackie,” but his beard was entirely his own. Many noticed his bibliophilic habit of toting dog-eared copies of ancient tomes with strange titles, and he had the uncanny ability to pull a Bible out of nowhere to make an unrelated point.⁷ He was always well dressed and kept a tight

6. Babson’s voice is actually preserved in one online clip. “Roger W. Babson says We’ve Turned the Corner on the Depression in 1931,” Youtube (website), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0l86SZumWHM>, retrieved 2/1/2022.

7. For one of numerous examples of Babson linking poverty to hedonism, see “Babson Urges Revivals,” *New York Times*, 11/11/1935. For a stereotypical

schedule. His autobiography reveals that he never met a person he could not either completely win over or completely alienate, as his enthusiastic personality usually prompted one of those reactions.⁸ His energy bordered on indefatigable, his shrewdness was intimidating, and his faith was arcane and unshakeable. But perhaps his most consuming and notable quality was his absolute conviction that he was meant to save the world.

Babson amassed a great fortune, and he used much of it to give back to the community, especially to several eastern Massachusetts towns associated with his youth and adulthood. His philanthropy included his founding of three colleges, two of which were successful. Babson College (formerly Babson Institute until 1969) in Wellesley, Massachusetts, has consistently been ranked very highly in publications both public and private. Webber College located in Babson Park, Florida, began as a woman's college and continues today as co-ed Webber International University. (His later failed Utopia College is discussed below.) He was respected in influential religious circles and rose to local and state-level ecclesiastical appointments.

Babson's influences in national politics dwarfed his great popularity among the Massachusetts votaries. He was a civil servant in the Wilson administration where he designed and cranked out war posters under George Creel.⁹ His political aspirations culminated in his 1940 presidential nomination for the Prohibition Party, which was, according to him, one of the most momentous events of his life.¹⁰ Despite his predictable loss in that election, long before his own campaign, Babson was an Oval Office *habitué*. Beginning with the first Roosevelt and ending with

mainstream criticism of his stance, see Henry Allen Ware's letter to the editor, "Religion and Economics," *New York Times*, 12/7/1935.

8. Babson's ability to win converts is evidenced throughout this essay. For a self-described example of his rhetoric alienating an entire crowd of otherwise like-minded people, see Roger W. Babson, *Actions and Reactions: An Autobiography of Roger W. Babson* (New York, 1935), 278–79; see also H. I. Shumway, *Good Man Gone Wrong?: Roger Babson and the Church* (Richmond, VA, 1940), 7, 30–31, and 47.

9. *Actions and Reactions*, 178.

10. *Actions and Reactions*, 178. See also Babson's relevant comments throughout Chapter 32.

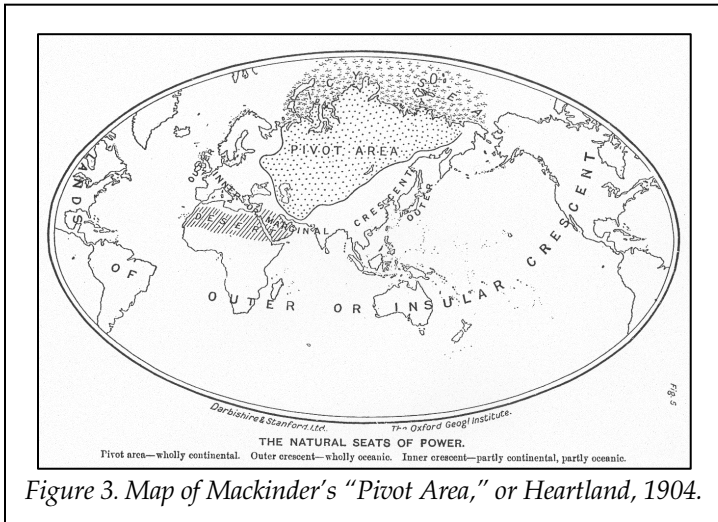


Figure 3. Map of Mackinder's "Pivot Area," or Heartland, 1904.

the second, Babson officially and unofficially advised presidents on economic booms and busts from the founding of the American Empire to the end of World War II.

It was during the early Cold War era dispersal movement that Babson began his Magic Circle campaign. His intentions were far more radical and comprehensive as compared to other contemporary dispersal efforts by the federal government, private city planners, and those proposed in the editorials in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (BOAS), which hoped to decentralize cities into their immediate rural hinterlands.¹¹ Babson wanted nothing less than to relocate *all* national industry and its accompanying population centers from their coastal clusters to the American Heartland in a regional development scheme that would eclipse even the grand vision held by Sir Halford Mackinder. Whereas Mackinder, the British geographer whose 1904 essay, "The Geographic Pivot of History," envisioned an Asian Heartland many times larger than the Magic Circle and centered in Siberia, both he and Babson conceived a "geographic causation in universal

11. Practically every BOAC issue from mid-1946 to the early 1950s discusses national dispersal. The general course of the narrative tone runs from postwar era advocacy to Korean War era reluctant resignation.

history." To paraphrase Mackinder, global geopolitics would in the future be ruled by whoever controlled the "Pivot Area" of central Asia, which in turn would be controlled by whoever dominated Eastern Europe. Mackinder's regional development imperatives focused on Russian railroad construction across the Steppe. Babson's plan was far more ambitious as he hoped to relocate the sum total of American culture and commerce to a circular zone in the Great Plains, which in turn would, after the nuclear fire, comprise nothing less than the totality of global civilization.¹²

This study focuses on the Iowa response to Babson's Magic Circle with several revealing factors in mind. The first is the aforementioned reality that Iowa, like all other states by the end of WWII, had long ago come to define itself as a unique place with an equally unique history and identity. Second, Iowa by this time had for many come to epitomize "the quintessential prairie state," and as such, it offers a fine test case to assess the Magic Circle's regional successes and failures in the American Heartland.¹³ Third, Iowans had *almost* every reason to go along with Babson's scheme as it portended great boosts of industry, commerce, revenue, and other prestigious payoffs congruent with the state's contemporary postwar aspirations. The last consideration is geographic and cartographic in nature. Unlike Kansas, the epicenter of the Magic Circle, and Oklahoma and Missouri, which happened to be the most central states in Babson's vision and thus garnered more of his personal attention, Iowa's location was relatively peripheral. Much of the state was actually outside Babson's demarcated circle—a fact that could explain, in part, why Babson never visited Iowa, and why Iowans may not have felt as enthusiastic about the Magic Circle as did boosters in states lying closer to its hectic center.

If Iowa was in the Magic Circle's orbit, then the small Kansas town of Eureka was the sun. Babson often recounted how initially he conceived his vision by taking a map of the United States

12. H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographic Journal*, 23 (April 1904), 421–44, *passim*.

13. See Joni L. Kinsey, Rebecca Roberts, and Robert F. Sayre, "Prairie Prospects: The Aesthetics of Plainness," in *Recovering the Prairie*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (Madison, WI, 1999), 34.

and drawing “a circle taking in the best parts of six states—Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska. . . . The crucial statistical measure was the ability of the area to take care of more than its present population.”

He initially chose the Kansas hamlet of Utopia to be the focus of his Magic Circle, partly due to his preoccupation with the writings of Sir Thomas More. In an already long though sporadic tradition of Western ruminations over the theoretically perfect state, it was More’s 1519 treatise, titled *Utopia*, which first linked geographic centrality to European religious moralism and societal harmony. In the 1949 edition of his autobiography Babson encapsulated his Magic Circle ambitions as seeking to answer the question of “[W]hy was the program of Sir Thomas More not successful when tried by the small group of social minded farmers who took this name [Utopia] for their Kansas community in 1857?”¹⁴ But hagiography and name association were not enough for Babson’s plan as his circle had to be strategically located as well. The Magic Circle had to be situated reasonably close to the geographic center of the nation so that its future residents could survive a Soviet nuclear strike. Based on Babson’s writings, his 1946 discovery that Utopia, Kansas was located fewer than 200 miles from the federally calculated geographic center of the nation must have seemed more providential than coincidental. That particular point eventually proved moot as Babson, after arriving in Eureka by rail and catching a car ride to nearby Utopia, found the latter too small for his designs and instead settled on the former as his new “Mecca of the Atomic Age.”¹⁵

14. *Actions and Reactions*, 317 and 319. See George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, eds., *Thomas More: Utopia* (Cambridge, UK, 1989).

15. The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (USCGS) in 1891 calculated that the (then) geographic center of the nation lay just outside of the small Kansas town of Lebanon in Smith County. Later additions of Alaska and Hawaii as new states prompted the USCGS to move the prestigious point to Belle Fourche, South Dakota by 1959. See Walter H. Schoewe, “Kansas and the Geodetic Datum of North America,” *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 51 (March 1948), 120–21; Jeffrey P. Stone, “Kansas ‘Dis-centers’: The Competition to Claim Ownership of the Center of the Nation,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 39 (Spring 2016), 52, 62–63.

Given Babson's specialty in economic prognostication, his experience conceptualizing large construction projects, and his attention to detail, it is somewhat strange that he never shared any infrastructural blueprints for what the Magic Circle should look like if it were successful. Surely the two-lane blacktop highways and bridges, gravel county roads, and regional airports that had thus far adequately served that large chunk of the Great Plains would not suffice. He did, however, insist on founding his third college, aptly named Utopia College (UC), and his operational headquarters in Eureka during the winter of 1946–47. Without first consulting colleges in surrounding areas, the newly appointed UC president, Walter A. Bowers, proudly announced in a mid-1947 interview that the equally new unaccredited, private, co-educational vocational college would specialize in teaching "people of the central area" the "fundamentals of personal and family security," which caused much reciprocal consternation.¹⁶ In later elaborations both Babson and Bowers described an 800-mile wide circle that was the "richest in time of peace and safest in time of war," which would, with UC at its center, prepare midwesterners for the predicted economic and spiritual rigors surely to be inherited by Babson's prophesized survivors in the aftermath of his prophesized war. The menu of five-week courses offered by UC focused on estate planning, vocational training and securities management, but also included classes on "spiritualism" and the Holy Bible. As a later student recruitment pamphlet would declare, the college specialized in "Life Planning for Youths and Estate Planning for Adults."¹⁷

The geostrategic, economic, and educational benefits of the Magic Circle represented the bulk of Babson and his acolytes' public comments during their decade-long campaign to popularize the project. These benefits were primarily short-term and

16. "President of Roger Babson's Utopia Explains Beliefs on Which Eureka College Based," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 8/17/1947. For examples of academic backlash against the announcement of the opening of UC, see "No Utopia for Babson," *Kansas City Star*, 11/23/1946; Ray Heady, "Babson School In Kansas Is Big Booster of Midwest," *Kansas City Star*, 6/24/1951.

17. *Utopia College: Eureka, Kansas*, pamphlet (Eureka, KS, 1947), "Utopia Clippings," KSHS.

pragmatic, especially when compared to the relatively few disclosures made by Babson's clan concerning the long-term, more abstract (in some cases abstruse) goals of the Magic Circle. Accordingly, Babson looked forward to the ultimate outcome of World War III and to his project's role in the salvation of humankind.

Babson's post-apocalyptic Magic Circle inhabitants would not only survive due to their residence within in the mapped nuclear safe zone, they would also serve as stock from which to draw a predicted "Royal Family of America" that would essentially rule the world. He was not employing a democratic euphemism here. Babson had a long history of disparaging popular democracy. His autobiography is replete with such comments, as are many of his numerous newspaper columns dating back to the 1930s. His convictions on this matter dovetailed nicely with his 1940 Prohibitionist Party presidential campaign.¹⁸ In the closing of his acceptance speech, delivered six years before he conceived of the Magic Circle, he seemed to be hinting at a future apocalypse to be remedied by Social Darwinism: "Our nation must choose between training and protecting our youth against evils or of [*sic*] permitting the weak and unfit to be eliminated. The present system of ignoring the fit and protecting the unfit is biologically unsound and will end in disaster."¹⁹

Elaborating on this and other points in his autobiography, Babson continued:

Because an early American document states that all men are "created equal," does not make it a fact. . . . The idea that the same freedom should be given to all is absolutely ridiculous. Wire fences and shotguns are as necessary for good government as for good farming. . . . There is no other way of handling the undomesticated humans which constitute over 10 per cent of our population.²⁰

18. *Actions and Reactions*, *passim* and especially Chapters 32 and 33. Chapter 32 discussed Babson's 1940 presidential nomination and includes reprints of the party's platform and his nomination acceptance speech. Chapter 33 elaborates on the need for the Magic Circle, and its short- and long-term goals.

19. *Actions and Reactions*, 301.

20. *Actions and Reactions*, 303.

To be clear, Babson's harsh "tooth and claw" interpretation of Social Darwinism, to borrow a phrase from Richard Hofstadter, was by the 1940s already a long-emaciated take on a dying movement. Babson nevertheless avowed such views until his last days—he died in 1967—and he naturally stressed the same philosophy in his Magic Circle conception.²¹

As for whom Babson judged "unfit" to participate in his exclusive postwar club, he was never shy about naming names. Moreover, upon reviewing his laundry list of undesirable, "undomesticated humans" one wonders why he undersold their ranks with the estimate of "over 10 per cent" of the national population. The poor alone, whom Babson always distrusted, comprised the majority of Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, not to mention unmarried women, the uneducated, Black people, Native Americans, and generally anyone not swayed by Protestantism—the perennial targets of Babson's nativist ire—were to be culled out of the populace, or at least the voting populace, before the Royal Family of America could arise to rule the smoldering global ruins.

Perhaps the most forthcoming description of what postwar life in the Magic Circle would look like was also the most perplexing. On the occasion of the opening of UC in late 1947, President Bowers, who was known to stick to Babson's slate of speaking points, revealed that Eureka would eventually serve as the capital for "the brotherhood of all men"—a literal utopia no longer in name only. This new world order would feature English as the universal language. Old barriers of race, creed, class, and immigration would be dissolved, as would all tariffs. And bizarrely, as Bowers explained, "international baseball teams will span the North Pole overnight to play in the various world capitals." But none of this would come to fruition without a fundamental "spiritual awakening" (i.e. mass conversions to Protestantism) among the world's surviving populations.²²

21. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (2nd ed.) (Boston, 1955), 201.

22. See "Russia May Launch Atomic Attack But U.S. Will Win, Utopian Says," *Breckinridge American*, 10/31/1947.

Babson's Magic Circle publicity campaign—radical, terrifying, hopeful, and often morally contradictory as it was—is all the more interesting when one considers its associated unpublicized foundational records. That private campaign, which involved booster letters to state governors, to state and city chambers of commerce, and the few extant letters and telegrams that circulated among Magic Circle luminaries, evinces a less fanciful, more practical Babson who acknowledged one mundane but potentially insurmountable barrier to success. The problem was aptly described in a March 1947 private letter from Babson to Bowers. Received before the two had met, and specifically sent to let Bowers know he would most likely be hired to head the proposed UC, Babson closed with the assurance (or perhaps reassurance) that the Magic Circle would be successful if “we can get these six states to *forget state lines* and prepare for the great events ahead.” Babson's articulation here is very revealing. It proves that he and many others very early in the campaign were aware of this potential problem and took it seriously. Further, according to those same unpublished sources, no Magic Circle advocates ever mentioned any other major impediment to the project's success. The adjoining fact that no spokesperson is known to have ever publicly acknowledged the problem during the decade-long campaign suggests that doing so was most likely discouraged. Given all this, Babson apparently chose to solve the unmentionable problem by completely disregarding state identities in his promotional jargon while touting the economic and strategic benefits of the Magic Circle as a *whole*, and by occasionally terrifying people with his apocalyptic visions of the future.²³

Iowans' initial reaction to Babson's late 1946 announcement of his Magic Circle plans is difficult to assess partly because by the time the news hit the press Iowans were still celebrating their state's centennial. In other words, if Babson's recent media pronouncements were the new commandments (he was often keen on equating his convictions to divine decree), then Iowans were

23. Italics added. Letter from Roger W. Babson to Mr. Bowers, 3/11/1947, “Utopia College” folder, Babson Papers, Horn Library Special Collections, Babson College, Wellesley, MA.

coincidentally preoccupied with their golden calf of state pride.²⁴ Iowa's 49th General Assembly had, five years prior, voted to create a nine-person committee charged with organizing and publicizing the upcoming year-long "celebration . . . of a character suitable to advance the . . . interest of the people of the state in development of our state during its first hundred years." To that end, the State Historical Society of Iowa, which had previously published "material relating to the early history of the state, and expanding activities in this direction," was tapped to contribute to the centennial cause. Together with the State Department of History and Archives and the more recently formed Iowa Association of Local Historical Studies (est. 1942), the state's historical organizations incorporated Iowa's birthday celebration "as part of their regular activity." Moreover, all public schools and all "study clubs and other groups in the state that meet regularly" were expected to promote "the history of the state and . . . its progress in all lines." By the time Governor Bourke H. Hickenlooper signed the assembly's final celebratory bill into law in 1943, it ambitiously foresaw "every county, every city, every town, every church, lodge, club, association, or other group of any kind" gleefully taking part.²⁵

Iowa was certainly not alone among prairie states in its anticipation of WWII-era and postwar economic growth. Following a general pattern pursued by all midwestern states, the Iowa General Assembly had, in 1940, created the Iowa Industrial and Defense Commission (IIDC) designed to, as Keith Orejel noted, unite "state-level defense with a campaign to acquire wartime industry." As early as 1942 the IIDC was already planning to capitalize on the industrial boom predicted to come in the immediate postwar years. Initially conceived of as the "Post War Planning Committee" [*sic*], and in concert with the contemporary "Post War Rehabilitation Commission," the state "Industrial Development

24. Babson was aware of and often wrote about the mainstream uncomfortable reactions to his business "preachings." For examples, see his *Fundamentals of Prosperity: What They Are and Whence They Come* (New York and Chicago, 1920), 5, 11–12, 16–18, 23, 31, 40, and 42.

25. Relevant excerpts from both the 49th and 50th General Assembly resolutions relating to the state's centennial committee are reprinted in "Iowa Statehood Centennial," *Annals of Iowa* 24 (Winter 1943), 237–41.

Commission" (IDC) was developed in 1944 as a potential postwar amalgam of the IIDC and various other state booster commissions. Taking their cues from the nearby Kansas Industrial Development Commission (KIDC), which an IIDC committee had visited in late 1944, the Iowa General Assembly created the IDC "to develop the present industries in Iowa and secure additional ones." The new organization's flagship publication, titled *Iowa . . . Land of Industrial Opportunity*, and its monthly serial, the *Development Bulletin*, coordinated to attract far-flung industry to the state well into the Cold War era.²⁶

The image of Iowa crafted by these wartime and postwar agencies was, for the most part, similar to those created by counterpart agencies in all contemporary midwestern states. Generally speaking, this image suggested that Iowa should no longer be known as merely an agrarian breadbasket but also an industrial state with future growth in mind. A postwar 1945 pamphlet issued by the IDC "[t]o the returning veteran" encapsulated the direction of the state's booster campaign that long outlived Babson's Magic Circle. Written as a summary of points made in the IDC's recent contribution to a U.S. Army Network's serial radio broadcast in the British Isles and titled *What G.I. Joe Heard About Iowa*, the pamphlet conceded that while "everyone knows that Iowa leads the nation in agriculture," they probably were not aware of the state's marvelous industrial history, capital resources, and manufacturing distinctions. Despite the reality that "Iowa possesses no great industrial centers," annual industrial income almost matched that of agriculture. It boasted that Iowa was now a transportation hub as well. The "Land Between Two Rivers" also ranked third in railroad mileage and could brag of "more automobiles on farms . . . than in any other state." Its labor force was described as "99% white and over 92% native born," its government is "usually Republican" but always conservative, literacy is high, and the taxes

26. Keith Orejel, "The Origins of the Iowa Development Commission: Agricultural Transformation and the Industrial Development in Mid-Twentieth Century Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 76 (Winter 2017), *passim*.

are low.²⁷ Iowa's idiosyncrasies aside, the state's postwar image as historically agrarian but recently industrial, possessing the infrastructure requisite for industrial growth, and populated by an educated, white, native-born American labor force was mirrored in contemporary state-level wartime and postwar booster campaigns throughout the region.

Another theme of Iowa's postwar boosters—that of centrality—was also a common claim throughout the Midwest. Practically every Heartland town, city, county, and state claimed to be the center of something in an effort to distinguish itself from or link itself to nearby competitors in hopes of attracting capital. According to the IDC, Iowa was “still the center of the nation's food supply,” alternately called the “breadbasket of the United States,” no doubt due to its high rates of land cultivation.²⁸ To the south, the Missouri State Chamber of Commerce had since the 1920s claimed to possess the “Center of the World's Breadbasket” as part of its larger title, the “center state in many things.”²⁹ Oklahoma City's Chamber of Commerce had since at least the 1930s portrayed itself, and by extension the state, as the “Center of the Southwest”—a region that included Texas, Kansas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and parts of New Mexico, Colorado and Missouri.³⁰ In Kansas, the KIDC envisioned the postwar state at “the center of a 5-state region” that included all of Oklahoma and parts of Nebraska, Texas, Missouri, New Mexico and Colorado.³¹ In all

27. See pamphlet, *What G.I. Joe Heard About Iowa*, “Iowa Development Commission” folder, Economic Development: Commission Minutes and Related Materials, 1940–1954” box, State Archives of Iowa (SAI), Des Moines.

28. *What G.I. Joe Heard About Iowa*.

29. See ad for *Missouri Magazine* in *Missouri Magazine* 2, no. 8 (December 1929), 26; S. H. Anderson “Missouri a National Dairy Center,” *Missouri Magazine* 2, no. 4, 15–16; “Missouri Facts For Missourians,” *Missouri Magazine* 3, no. 2 (June 1930), 20; and John Frederick Hull, “In Center of the World's Bread Basket,” *Missouri Magazine* 1, no. 4 (August 1928), 19, Missouri Chamber of Commerce Collection, Jefferson City, MO.

30. See masthead for “Bulletin No. 1,” *Greater Oklahoma City Movement*, 1/20/1932, “OKC Chamber of Commerce” folder, William F. Harn Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS), Oklahoma City, OK.

31. See booklet, *Strategic Kansas* (Topeka, KS, 1944), “KIDC” folder, “Kansas Industrial Development Commission” box, Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS), Topeka, KS.

cases, however, the areas of these state-based trade zones were roughly 800 to 1,000 miles across, limited as they were by the average 400–500 miles one could travel in a day by car from the zones' centers. Looking back on it, Babson himself acknowledged this time-honored metric and used it while calculating the appropriate size of his Magic Circle.³²

Unsatisfied with mere regional centrality, Iowa and other mid-western postwar states also bragged of their relative geographic positions within the nation. The geographic center of the (contiguous) nation, at least according to the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1898, was just outside the town of Lebanon in north-central Kansas.³³ The KIDC leaned heavily on this fact to justify slogans including "Kansas: Where East Meets West," and state road maps produced by the Kansas State Historical Society, which had mentioned the national center only sporadically in narratives since the 1930s, began regularly noting it in 1942.³⁴ States with trade zones that included that enviable location naturally glommed on to the distinction. The IDC bragged that Iowa's location so "geographically close to the center of the nation" ensured that the state was "perfectly located for nation-wide distribution."³⁵ The postwar Missouri Division of Resources and Development took a more tangential tack by claiming the "Heart of America" and center of the "Mid-Continent Area," while employing cleverly manipulated maps featuring an enlarged Missouri superimposed on a map of

32. *Actions and Reactions*, 320. Babson stated, "When talking about Utopia College, I like to draw a circle, with the center Eureka [*sic*], and a radius of 400 miles. This is an average day's automobile run for people who live in the Central West."

33. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Triangulation in Kansas*, U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, Serial no. 158, Special Publication no. 70 (1921), 3; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Geographic Centers of the United States*, U.S. Geological Survey, unnumbered series, 1964: 1; and Walter H. Schoewe, "Kansas and the Geodetic Datum of North America," *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 51 (March 1948), 121.

34. KSHC maps boasted of the "geographical center of the nation" in map narratives in 1936, 1937, 1942, 1945, and from 1956 to 1963. Their maps began displaying the location of the "Geographical Center of the U.S." near Lebanon beginning in 1950. For digital images of these maps, see "KDOT Historic State Maps," Kansas Department of Transportation (website), <http://www.ksdot.org/bureaus/bur-transplan/maps/HistoricStateMaps.asp>, retrieved 2/5/2022.

35. *What G.I. Joe Heard About Iowa*, 6.

the nation. The resulting image effectively placed most of Kansas, and more importantly the precise section of Kansas containing the geographic center of the nation, firmly within Missouri's borders.³⁶ Even the city of Denver, Colorado (342 miles from Lebanon) was lauded as "a mountain city only a few hundred miles from the point in northern Kansas that marks the exact center of the nation."³⁷ Perhaps the most ambitious claim of proximity to the national center, however, was made by a spokesman for the General Electric Corporation in 1951. In a *Wall Street Journal* interview, Kentucky boosters cheered when the company's vice president announced plans to build an industrial park "near the geographic center of the United States" and named Louisville (an outrageous 695 miles from Lebanon) as the primary consideration.³⁸

Midwestern states, then, emerged from WWII with very similarly themed booster campaigns. They all sought postwar industrial growth through state-based agencies. To that end, they recognized the need to augment their respective state's historic agrarian identity with a more modern, industrial one. To attract industry, they stressed traditional regional values including conservative government, reliable (non-unionized) white labor, abundant natural resources and bountiful harvests. Equally important to these campaigns, however, were the much newer wartime and postwar industrial themes that stressed transportation and other infrastructure as well as an expansion of prewar, state-based *regional* trade zones into postwar claims of *national* centrality. And, in late 1946, Roger W. Babson stepped into this vibrant, postwar Heartland battlefield of boosterism.

So, given all this, how did midwesterners generally respond to Babson's scheme? And more importantly, how did Iowans

36. See "Center State is a Horn of Plenty," *Missouri Magazine* 2, no. 10 (February 1930), 5; see ad for *Missouri Magazine* in *Missouri Magazine* 2, no. 8 (December 1929), 26; and ads by the Missouri Division of Resources and Development in *Fortune* 40, no. 3 (September 1949), 142; and *Fortune* 41, no. 3 (March 1950), 136.

37. Richard L. Neuberger, "Should We Move the Capital to the Rockies?" *New York Times*, 10/6/1946.

38. See "Business Milestones—General Electric Plans Multi-Million Dollar 'Appliance Park' Somewhere In The Midwest," *Wall Street Journal*, 4/3/1951.

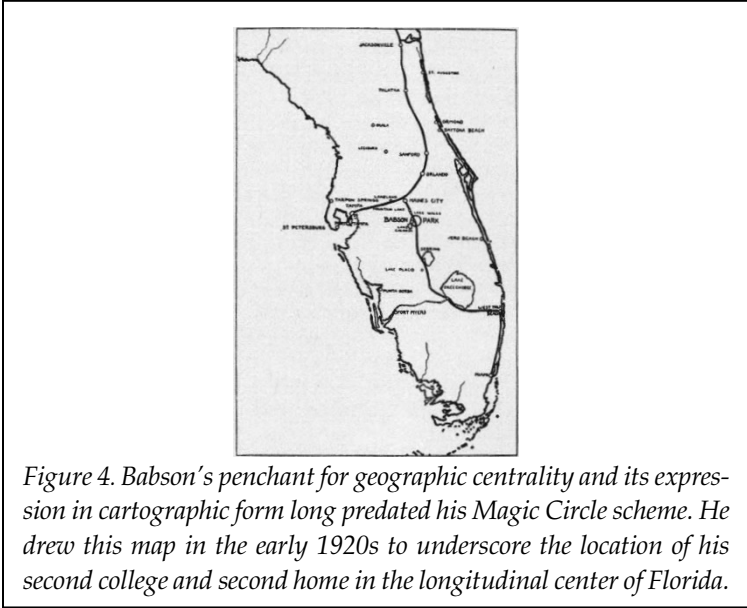


Figure 4. Babson's penchant for geographic centrality and its expression in cartographic form long predated his Magic Circle scheme. He drew this map in the early 1920s to underscore the location of his second college and second home in the longitudinal center of Florida.

respond? In a survey of the midwestern reaction to Babson's Magic Circle plan, and narrowing down to Iowa, the plan itself was an exercise in geographic centrality. This is largely because Babson was preoccupied with geographic centrality. Much more than his affinity for More's *Utopia*, Babson's philanthropy is replete with strains of "the center." He loved expressing his preoccupation with cartographic imagery. In his elaboration on the construction of Babson College, he meticulously insisted that a "Great Map of the United States" be "erected in the center of campus." Similarly, he waxed on geographic centrality's virtues when he described the origins of he and his wife's selection of sites to build their summer home and second college campus in Florida in the late 1920s. The resulting community, called Babson Park, was carefully calculated to reside "both in the center of the state and the center of [a] ridge of highlands." To drive the point home, Babson included a map of southern Florida that depicted a circle marking the longitudinally central location of his new community (Figure 4).³⁹

39. *Actions and Reactions*, 228 and 232–33.

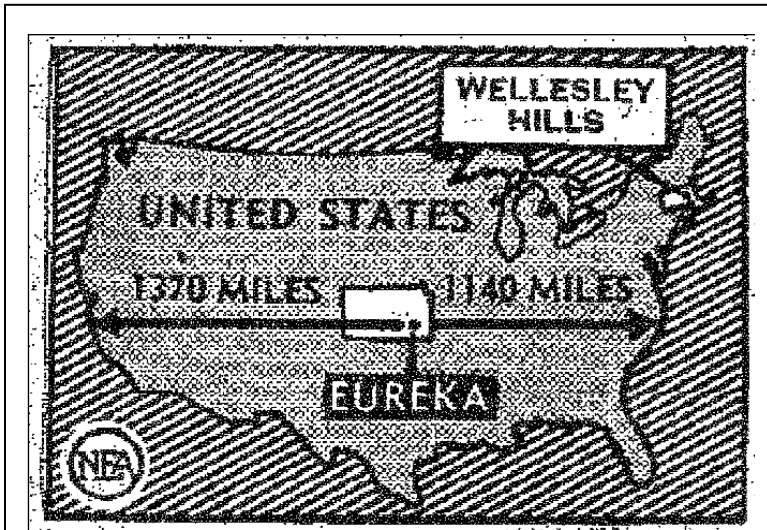


Figure 5. One of the earliest public cartographic depictions of the Magic Circle failed to mention the circle at all, and instead stressed the geographic centrality of the circle's center at Eureka, Kansas.

As for his preachments describing the benefits of the Magic Circle, Babson usually, and crucially, began by describing the strategic benefits of living at its center in Eureka, Kansas. His subsequent elaborations on the surrounding 800-mile-wide hinterland, by contrast, often carried a collateral tone. For example, in an interview for the *Wichita Evening Eagle* conducted barely three weeks after the announcement of his scheme, neither Babson nor the journalist mentioned “the Magic Circle” or its dimensions. The point was clear and exclusive—“Eureka is new port in Atomic Storm”—to the extent that the article’s accompanying map of the nation stressed the longitudinal centeredness of the small Kansas town, and by extension that of Kansas, again with no mention of the larger, circular project.⁴⁰ Likewise, the bulk of Babson’s time, money, and attention dedicated to the Magic Circle’s development were spent on developing Eureka itself. As mentioned earlier, in late 1946 he located his operational

40. Alan Wade, (untitled), *Wichita Evening Eagle*, 12/12/1946.

headquarters, his third college, and his third home there. At Eureka, the inaugural meeting of the Magic Circle industrial development committee in April 1948 included representatives of “ten [city] chambers of commerce,” but they all hailed from the three central states. They were the crucial players meant to spread Babson’s gospel to the other central cities. The missing city representatives from the three peripheral states would be recruited almost as an afterthought.⁴¹

If Iowans’ response to Babson’s Magic Circle was less than enthusiastic, it may partly have been reciprocal. Throughout his campaign, while Babson was so focused on Eureka, he neglected the circle’s periphery. For man with such a reputation—much of it self-professed—for statistical exactitude, it seems odd that he could never settle on how large his circle should be. As described above, the Magic Circle was usually said to have a 400-mile radius. Yet scarcely six months after his campaign began, Babson, in an interview with the *Kansas City Star*, claimed a 350-mile radius.⁴² Still uncertain four years later, he told the same newspaper that a 300-mile radius was more realistic.⁴³ Any Iowan paying attention then might have guessed that these 50- and 100-mile perturbations gave them reason to doubt Babson’s mid-1947 press release which reassured the Hawkeye State that “[t]he circle passes through Sioux City.”⁴⁴ The periodic migrations of the circle’s limit may have also contributed to the appearance of equally confusing political attributes of Babson’s project, especially where its outer regions were concerned. The Oklahoma example below notwithstanding, Babson and his fellow enthusiasts regularly described the Magic Circle as chiefly comprising six states (Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Nebraska, and Iowa) with no mention of more peripheral claims.⁴⁵ However,

41. See “Weld a ‘Magic Circle,’” *Kansas City Times*, 4/20/1948.

42. Conway Carlson, “Babson on His Campus,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/13/1947 and “Weld a ‘Magic Circle.’”

43. Ray Heady, “Babson School in Kansas is Big Booster of Midwest,” *Kansas City Star*, 6/24/1951; Carlson, “Babson on His Campus,” and “Weld a ‘Magic Circle.’”

44. “Richest and Safest,” *Anamosa Journal*, 4/17/1947.

45. For example, see *Breckinridge American*, 2/15/1948.

this conflicted with a 1947 Babson-issued pamphlet which claimed a seven-state membership including Texas.⁴⁶ His 1954 description of the circle's distal district as "parts of nine other states" (Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Dakota, Tennessee and Texas) was even more ambitious.⁴⁷

Babson's ambiguity over the Magic Circle's periphery and a contemporary lack of enthusiasm for his project in peripheral states were noticed early on in a revealing 1948 interview that appeared in *Fortune* magazine. Although the unnamed journalist focused on the positive reception of Babson's plans in the three central states (Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri), the article noted that "[d]own near the southern periphery of The Circle, allegiance is more spotty." This was in part due to Babson reluctantly stretching the circle's boundary to include Fort Worth, Texas so as not to alienate a powerful city booster there. As for Texas, the article's description of it being "too preoccupied with itself to be a spiritual member" hinted at the state's then recent centennial anniversary in 1945, and it reminds us of Iowa's similar prideful preoccupation one year later. "Similarly," the author continued, "Shreveport, Louisiana, and Memphis, Tennessee, are not conscious of being The Circle." Barely two years in, the article noted, "The Magic Circle campaigns have been uncoordinated and the publicity, concerned as it is with centers and circles within The Circle, frequently invidious."⁴⁸

Iowa is quite far from Eureka, and Iowans' relatively cool reception of Babson's plans seems to show that the appeal of the Magic Circle, as with Babson's interest, diminished exponentially with distance from its center. In Iowa, the two state offices most heavily involved in postwar booster activities were the Governor's Office and the IDC. A survey of the papers of the relevant governors (who served from 1946 to 1956) reveals absolutely no

46. See pamphlet, "Babson's Magic Circle," 3, Donnelly Collection, Missouri Chamber of Commerce Collection.

47. "America's Heartland Development Month," *New York Times*, 4/4/1954.

48. See "The Magic Circle," *Fortune* 38, no. 4 (October 1948), 82-83. The powerful Fort Worth booster mentioned was Amon Carter.

correspondence on the Magic Circle.⁴⁹ This reality is starker when considering that a copy of at least one letter, in this case from UC president Bowers to Iowa governor Robert D. Blue, has been found in the contemporary papers of Missouri governor Phil M. Donnelly and Kansas governor Frank Carlson.⁵⁰ Dated mid-February 1948, Bowers' letter acknowledged Iowa's recently announced membership in "a conference of governors of twelve Midwestern states," and recommended Blue call for "a similar conference . . . for the seven states comprising the 'Magic Circle' area."⁵¹ Bowers, who hoped to convince Blue of the strategic defense value of the Magic Circle "[i]n the event of World War III" might have been more convincing if he had cited Iowa's longer membership in the bipartisan Senate "Decentralization Committee" of rural states, which organized to investigate the negative economic and strategic impacts of regionally concentrated national industry.⁵² The absence of Bowers' 1948 letter in the State Archives of Iowa is somewhat strange. Stranger still is the similar absence of any Magic Circle-related correspondence in the papers of Governor William S. Beardsley, who served from 1949 to 1954, and who, in 1950, joined a short-lived coalition of governors from "the states embraced by the Magic Circle area."⁵³

49. These would include the terms office of Robert D. Blue (1945–49), William S. Beardsley (1949–54), Leo Elthon (1954–55), and Leo Hoegh (1955–57). All were Republicans. Sourced from the respective Governors' Papers, SAI.

50. Carlson, it should be noted, is the only state governor known to have personally met with a member of the Babson family. Babson's daughter, Edith Lowe Babson, accompanied Walter A. Bowers to his mid-November 1948 speech before the Topeka Optimists Club, and Carlson met them both afterward. See "'Magic Circle' as Bulwark in Atom War Is Forecast," *Topeka Journal*, 11/19/1948.

51. See letter from Walter A. Bowers to Governor Robert D. Blue, 2/16/1948, Phil M. Donnelly Papers, C2151, State Historical Society of Missouri (SHSM); and in the Frank Carlson Papers, box 27, folder 4, KSHS.

52. Sidney A. Govenar, "NE Senators Ready Fight Against McCarran," *Nashua Telegram*, 9/28/1945. Although the membership of this committee changed over time, its core members were Senators Guy Gillette (D-IA), Orrice Abram Murdock Jr. (D-UT), John W. Thomas (R-ID), Gerald Nye (D-ND), Edward V. Robertson (R-WY), and John Hollis Bankhead II (D-AL).

53. See telegram from "We, the governors of the states embraced by the Magic Circle" to President Harry S. Truman, 12/15/1950, Phil M. Donnelly Papers, C2151, SHSM. Membership included governors Sid McMath (D-AR), Frank

Perhaps a more relevant litmus test for how enthusiastically, or not, Iowa and the other Magic Circle states embraced Babson's plans is found in the records of their respective economic development councils, which were usually adjuncts of state chambers of commerce. Representing Kansas, the KIDC was predictably the most responsive to the Eureka-centered project, followed closely by the Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board to the immediate south, and the Missouri Department of Resources and Development to the immediate east. But in Iowa, the IDC was only marginally more impressed with the Magic Circle scheme than the Governor's Office. Even though Babson had publicly revealed his project in November 1946, in its bimonthly meeting minutes the IDC did not even acknowledge the Magic Circle until five years later. In January 1951 the IDC voted favorably to pay for state membership in the Magic Circle Educational Foundation (MCEF), a Babson-owned think tank and publication house created in 1950 and designed to win converts to the cause.⁵⁴ However, three aspects of this IDC action suggest a lack of enthusiasm. First, the IDC opted to pay for the most minimal level of MCEF membership, that of a "Contributing member," at a rate of \$100 per year. (The other levels of membership were "Sustaining membership" at \$100-\$500, "Founders membership" at \$500-\$1,000, and "Charter membership" at \$1,000.)⁵⁵ Second, the IDC apparently only retained said MCEF membership, paltry as it was, for one year as no such dues were ever recorded in the commission's later financial statements.⁵⁶ And third, from its inception to at least 1956, the IDC seems to have been primarily focused instead on state-based industrial development.

Hagaman (R-KS), Forrest Smith (D-MO), Val Peterson (R-NE), and Roy J. Turner (D-OK).

54. See "Post to a Nebraskan," *Kansas City Times*, 4/15/1950.

55. See letter from Walter S. Bowers to (Kansas) Governor Arthur Capper, 10/1/1950, and accompanying pamphlet titled "The Magic Circle," in KIDC Papers, KSHS.

56. IDC meeting minutes for May 18, 1951, 3, "Economic Development: Commission Minutes and Related Materials, 1940-1954," box 1, "Expenses" folder, SAI.

In other words, in the first decade after WWII when the Magic Circle campaign was the most strenuous, the Iowa government was preoccupied with what might be called a state "Spirit of '46." During that time both the Governor's Office and the IDC were largely unresponsive to Babson's regional overtures. Led mainly by the IDC, the state's 1946 centennial celebration themes, designed as they were to highlight state-based attractions for industry, carried over into the following decade.

Iowans could have gone in the other direction. Oklahoma found many ways to incorporate Babson's vision into its anniversary festivities. During the state's 50-year anniversary in 1947 the Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board (OPRB), in coordination Oscar Monrad, the wealthy manager of the First National Bank and Trust Company of Oklahoma City, temporarily recast their state's image from that of the "Oil Capital of the World" located in the "Center of the Southwest," which it had claimed as recently as 1945. Lost in the transition was also the state's traditional 800-mile wide economic zone, coincidentally called the "Magic Empire."⁵⁷

For the next few years the Oklahoma state government not only embraced the Magic Circle, it also claimed a uniquely state-based take on the project. Now Oklahoma, not Eureka or even Kansas, was "in the center of the Magic Circle," and that circle was now best described as "the Great *Southwest* area."⁵⁸ This was a subtle but crucial departure from the "Central Area" of the Midwest Babson sometimes alternately called his Magic Circle zone. The OPRB even produced a large Magic Circle map in 1947 as part of its "Fiftieth Anniversary train . . . tour through the East . . . to explain the blessings of the Circle" with a similarly

57. See "Oklahoma: A State of Industrial Distinction" for collected excerpts of state and city booster ads published in the September 1945 edition of *Manufacturer's Record*, 1-2; and "Transportation, 1945," both in "Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board" box, "1945" folder, OHS.

58. Italics added to "Industrial East Looks to Oklahoma in 'Magic Circle,'" *Boise City News*, 5/13/1948.



Figure 6. Oklahoma’s 50th state anniversary in 1947 prompted to the government there to embrace the Magic Circle, but only by recasting its design to fit the state’s preexisting Southwestern identity. Accordingly, the northern states of Nebraska and Iowa disappeared.

southwestern flavor.⁵⁹ Although the map correctly reproduced the features of the Magic Circle, it strangely omitted the circle’s northern states of Nebraska and Iowa while including the normally omitted southern states of Louisiana and Texas, and the western states of New Mexico and Colorado. Stranger still was the OPRB map’s inclusion of the now state-less northern cities of Lincoln and Omaha (both located in Nebraska). According to the Oklahoma government, the Magic Circle was just another way to celebrate the state’s 50-year reign as the “Center of the Southwest” in its postwar campaign to attract industry. Babson never

59. “Progress In . . . Industrial Development, Publicity and Information, Water Resources, Recreation and State Parks, Forestry,” in *A Report to the Governor and the 22nd State Legislature*, OPRB, 1/1/1949, “OPRB” box, “1949” folder, OHS.

publicly spoke to the ORPB's manipulation of his vision. If he knew of it, one wonders if he minded that Iowa and Nebraska had become casualties of cartographic piracy.

Babson's Magic Circle ultimately failed for many reasons, most of which were the same reasons that the national decentralization movement failed. Decentralization may have represented, as Margaret Pugh O'Mara noted, a conveniently "neat overlap" of strategic and economic functions, but the realities of American political demographics proved more powerful.⁶⁰ The coastal states with their teeming urban centers comprised an industrial bloc in the U.S. House of Representatives large enough to thwart any meaningful decentralization bill. And the relatively few Congressional defense reforms that did make it through with decentralization concerns intact gave only a weak nod to the effort. Although the monumental 1947 National Security Act prioritized "the strategic relocation of industries, services, Government and economic activities," subsequent National Security Resources Board (NSRB) work to that end focused mainly on dispersing vital agencies into local, not national, hinterlands.⁶¹ The contemporary Armed Services Procurement Act similarly limited its attention to "such factors as geographical location . . . [and] avoidance of overconcentration" to only "a few companies."⁶² The 1951 Rains Amendment to the Defense Production Act of the same year restricted its decentralization efforts only to newly built defense plants. Even that proved too much for the industry-friendly House, which quashed the bill.⁶³ Even if Congress had united on this issue, any meaningful national decentralization, whether by Babson's more radical standards or by those of the federal government, would have been absurdly cost prohibitive. The 81st Congress's 1950 decade prospective defense report dismally estimated that "the cost of a true deurbanization

60. O'Mara, 34.

61. U.S. Senate. *Mobilization Planning and the National Security* (1950–1960), 81st Cong., 2nd sess., doc. 204, 1950, 68.

62. O'Mara, 30.

63. *BOAS* 7, no. 9 (Sept. 1951), 276–77.

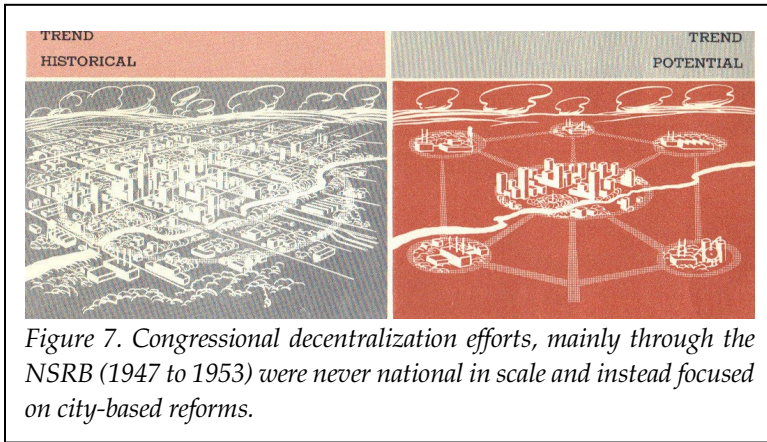


Figure 7. Congressional decentralization efforts, mainly through the NSRB (1947 to 1953) were never national in scale and instead focused on city-based reforms.

program” would top a staggering \$300 billion. By comparison, the contemporary national budget was a seventh of that.⁶⁴ For its estimation, the report cited Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Hanson W. Baldwin’s 1947 book, *The Price of Power*, but his own estimate may have been influenced by a weighty *BOAS* article published one year prior.⁶⁵

It thus fell to the presidency, mainly through speeches and executive orders, to carry the national decentralization torch. On this matter Truman was far more enthusiastic than his successor, but the separation of federal powers limited his leverage to the military sphere, to public support for the relatively modest efforts of the NSRB, and to a few other decentralization initiatives. He touted the Federal Works Agency’s 1948 advisement, based on the NSRB’s lead, to state and local officials to consider decentralization in future planning.⁶⁶ That same year he oversaw the

64. Figure taken from “The American Presidency Project” (website), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-budget-message-the-congress-fiscal-year-1950#:~:text=Estimated%20expenditures%20for%20the%20fiscalof%20Government%20corporations%20and%20enterprises>, retrieved 11/19/2022.

65. Hanson W. Baldwin, *The Price of Power* (New York, 1947); J. Marshak, E. Teller, and L.R. Klein, “Dispersal of Cities and Industries,” *BOAS* 1, no. 9 (4/15/1946), 12–16 (specifically 15).

66. “State, Local Officials Advised to Consider Industrial Dispersion,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8/8/1948.

relocation of the Strategic Air Command from Andrews Field, Maryland to Offut Field, Nebraska due to the latter's "strategic location near the geographic center" of the nation.⁶⁷ The following year he endorsed the recently minted Defense Department Munitions Board's recommendations for military contractors to locate new factories in dispersed locations. Four months into the Korean War Truman also issued an executive order prioritizing decentralization in the awarding of defense contracts.⁶⁸ Yet even Truman, in his quieter moments, acknowledged that the whole decentralization campaign may be a futile effort as the national *bete noir* of losing the atomic monopoly to Soviet weapon advancements in the near future was most likely inevitable. As early as 1945, Manhattan Project scientists had warned the Roosevelt administration of this eventuality.⁶⁹ After all, as explored by Michael S. Sherry, it only took the U.S. military three years to graduate from conventional bombs to atomic supremacy, and by 1946, false rumors were circulating that the Soviets had done the same.⁷⁰

The Soviets had the atomic bomb by 1949, four years after the U.S. did. American hydrogen bomb development, achieved in 1951, was matched even faster by the Russians two years later. The catastrophic implications of these rival fundamental weapons advancements were exacerbated by the concomitant proliferation of nuclear, and later thermonuclear, bomb production. By 1955, ironically recognized as the beginning of the first "thaw" in the Cold War, the public consensus against decentralization crystallized in response to the overwhelming reality that the nuclear arms race guaranteed that no place on earth was safe from nuclear annihilation.

In that year the Federal Civil Defense Administration, in its revised air raid warning signal protocols, revealed that, based on U.S. tests conducted at Bikini Atoll the previous year, a single Soviet hydrogen bomb could produce a lethal fallout shadow of

67. "Strategic Air Force to Shift to Nebraska," *New York Times*, 5/22/1948.

68. O'Mara, 30.

69. Michael D. Gordin, *Red Cloud at Dawn: Truman, Stalin, and the End of the Atomic Monopoly* (New York, 2009), 76.

70. Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, 1987), *passim*.

roughly 7,000 square miles.⁷¹ In a profound understatement, a defense expert commented that “the probable development of guided [nuclear] missiles . . . might change the problem of dispersal to some extent.”⁷² More dismally and realistically, a contemporary essay concluded that fewer than 1,000 Soviet nuclear bombs could wipe out the entire U.S. economy.⁷³ Given all this, it is no surprise that almost no one talks or writes about the postwar national decentralization movement since it fizzled out by the end of the Eisenhower administration.⁷⁴ Even Michael J. Ybarra’s 850-page tome on Senator Pat McCarran ignores his ten years as chair of the Decentralization Committee.⁷⁵ It is almost as if this urgent, clamorous, decade-long bipartisan national movement never occurred.

The Magic Circle failed for all the above reasons, but also for reasons as idiosyncratic as Babson himself. As argued here, the only barrier to the project’s success recognized by Babson and his supporters was that of rival state identities. This was certainly true in Iowa, especially given the contemporary rush of pride associated with the state’s 1946 centennial. However, Babson’s preoccupation with Eureka and its tri-state hinterland undermined the Magic Circle’s appeal in more peripheral areas. This was also evinced in Iowa because the state was often omitted in descriptions of Babson’s project. As a result, reception of Babson’s scheme in the peripheral states was lukewarm at best. The Iowa case reveals a strong governmental preference for state-based

71. “Terror’s Child,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3/3/1955.

72. Lewis A. Dexter, “Defense Means Production,” *The American Scholar* 24 (Summer 1955), 306.

73. T. F. Walkowicz, “Concepts for the Nuclear Age,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 299 (May 1955), 120.

74. Some exceptions would be Aaron L. Friedberg’s *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America’s Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Michael Quinn Dudley, “Sprawl as Strategy: City Planners Face the Bomb,” *Journal of Planning and Education Research* 21 (2001), 52–63; Kathleen A. Tobin, “The Reduction of Urban Vulnerability: Revisiting 1950s American Suburbanization as Civil Defense,” *Cold War History* 2, no. 2 (January 2002), 1–32.

75. Michael J. Ybarra, *Washington Gone Crazy: Senator Pat McCarran and the Great American Communist Hunt* (Hanover, NH, 2004).

industrial boosterism in the postwar years with only a passing nod given to Babson's overtures.

On the subject of Magic Circle historiography, there is none, save for my own recent efforts, which is quite a shame.⁷⁶ Research inquiries sent to the curators of the Babson Collection housed at Babson College have been helpful if only to confirm that the subject of the Magic Circle is largely unknown to them. Yet that anonymous *Fortune* journalist was not wrong to call the Magic Circle "the most extraordinary campaign in the history of U.S. boosting."⁷⁷ This essay goes further in claiming that had Babson succeeded he would have created the largest migration in human history whether war came or not. The regrettable forgetting of Babson's failed vision is best symbolized in the micro-history of the Babson Globe erected at Babson College on Memorial Day in 1955. Billed as the "World's Greatest Revolving Globe" and measuring 30 feet in diameter and weighing roughly 37 tons, the globe offered a spinning view of the earth in full color "as it would appear to a traveler in space who saw it at a distance of 5,000 miles."⁷⁸ Depicted prominently on the globe was Babson's Magic Circle, and noticeably absent were any state lines. At some point after Babson's death in 1967 the Magic Circle was ignominiously erased from his proud globe, and with it, apparently, the last vestige of one man's arduous attempt to save the world.

76. Stone, 57–59.

77. *Fortune*, 82.

78. "Babson's Authentic Statement," *The Caldwell News*, 6/6/1955; see ad for Bethlehem Steel in *U.S. News and World Report*, 11/18/1955.

