

The Republican Party in Iowa and the Defeat of Smith Wildman Brookhart, 1924-1926

GEORGE WILLIAM MCDANIEL

Politics in Iowa is what Hugh Latimer and Mayor Gatnor would call "mish-mash." Senator Brookhart, renominated in the Republican primary, is going up and down the State denouncing Mr. Coolidge as the candidate of the "Wall Street bloc." Members of the Old Guard are supporting the Democratic nominee for Senator whom, for various reasons, considerable numbers of Democrats reject. Mr. Brookhart is a thorough La Follettian but technically a regular Republican. He called for the withdrawal of General Dawes from the Republican ticket. The Republican State Committee, whose thunder seems to make the Iowans laugh, "read him out of the party." Things looked very bad to the Republicans.¹

FOR THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY Iowa political alignments were seriously disturbed by the continuing struggle between progressives and "standpats" for control of the Republican party. Following World War I, however, the line between the two wings of the party became less distinct, and the conservative "standpats" began to hope that they could regain control of the party. The candidacy of Smith W. Brookhart for the Senate seat held by Albert B. Cummins aided their efforts by dividing the progressive ranks. Between 1920 and 1926, a period when Brookhart was a candidate for the Senate in seven primary and general elections, the single goal of defeating him subsumed all other party considerations. Ironically, opposition by party

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Iowa College Teachers of History conference in 1985.

1. *New York Times*, 31 October 1924.

leaders to Brookhart's repeated candidacy eventually reunited the two wings of the party.

Unity did not finally come, though, until after the "mish-mash" years of 1924 to 1926, when the Republican and Democratic parties rallied behind the leadership of a new political action group, the Republican Service League, and joined forces to remove Brookhart from the Senate. By the end of 1926, however, Brookhart was safely back in the Senate, and the Iowa Republican party was more united than it had been in a quarter of a century.

BROOKHART began his political career in 1894 when he was elected to the first of three terms as Washington County Attorney. After the turn of the century he joined the progressive wing of the Republican party, formed a longtime relationship with Albert B. Cummins, and developed a lifelong opposition to private ownership of the railroads. Convinced that the railroads were subverting the democratic process, he came to believe that government ownership of the railroads afforded the only means to prevent future abuses. Together with Cummins and other progressives, Brookhart fought for a series of political and economic reforms.

In 1920, however, Brookhart split with Cummins over the Esch-Cummins Transportation Act, which would return railroads to private control after a period of wartime governmental operation. As Brookhart saw it, Cummins's cosponsorship of the act was a sellout to the railroads. When Cummins ran for renomination to his third term as United States senator, Brookhart opposed him. Standpats who had lost control of the party years before rallied to support Cummins. This shift began to close the gap in the party that had begun twenty years before. Brookhart lost the election but received 45 percent of the primary vote.²

In 1922 Brookhart seized another opportunity to run for the Senate. In February of that year President Warren G. Harding appointed William S. Kenyon, Iowa's junior senator and longtime friend of Brookhart, to the federal bench, leaving two years of his Senate term unfilled. Brookhart immediately announced his candidacy for the seat. The result was another clash

2. *Iowa Official Register*, 1921-1922, 424-25.

Defeat of Smith Brookhart

with the Republican regulars. Ironically, in their effort to defeat him, the party regulars tried to take advantage of an early progressive reform measure which required a candidate to receive at least 35 percent of the primary vote. If none did so, the choice was left up to the state convention.

Although Brookhart ran on a platform of farm relief, party leaders saw Brookhart himself as the issue. In the hope of denying him the necessary 35 percent of the vote, they flooded the field with five other candidates. To the surprise of everyone but Brookhart, he received 41.1 percent of the vote. The general election was much the same story. At the end of that campaign Austin Haines wrote in *The Nation*, "Brookhart goes his way, practically alone, saying nothing in commendation of the Republican Administration, asking no favors of the organization, and avoiding any strictly partisan appeal, confident of his strength with the mass of voters on election day." In spite of the efforts of conservative Republicans, he won the election with 63 percent of the vote.³

Brookhart had no sooner been elected in 1922 than discussion began about defeating him in 1924. In the primary that year Brookhart tried to make farm relief the major issue. Instead, two other issues quickly came to the fore: Brookhart's Republicanism and his Americanism. In the Red Scare era, his longtime advocacy of government ownership of the railroads, combined with his espousal of marketing cooperatives for farmers, made him suspect. Then in 1923 he took a trip to Russia, where he made favorable comments about the new Soviet government. Combining these themes, his opponent's campaign literature said that Iowans should vote for a Republican who advocated Republican principles and policies and who did not impeach the "idealism of America" by comparing the "stability of [the American] government to that of the Russian Soviet." Still, Brookhart remained a strong favorite throughout the campaign, and when the votes were counted he had received 55 percent of the total.⁴

3. Austin Haines, "Smith W. Brookhart, Dissenter," *The Nation*, 1 November 1922, 446; *Iowa Official Register*, 1923-1924, 392-93, 491-96.

4. Campaign pamphlet, President Jessup Papers, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City; *Des Moines Register*, 22 June 1924; *Iowa Official Register*, 1925-1926, 420-21.

On July 22 Iowa Republicans gathered in Des Moines for the regular state convention. Some delegates were ready to accept the verdict of the primaries and issue a general endorsement of all Republican candidates for office, including Brookhart, without specifically naming any. But others wanted a resolution endorsing only those Republican candidates who would endorse the national ticket of Calvin Coolidge and Charles G. Dawes. Asked whether he would support the national ticket, Brookhart said simply, "I'll do as much for Coolidge as he does for me."⁵ Although many observers predicted a stormy convention, it proved to be remarkably calm. Delegates endorsed Coolidge and Dawes, but no other candidates for any office. The platform catered to both the progressive forces and the anti-Brookhart elements. On the one hand, it congratulated Iowa for being second to no other state in passing forward-looking legislation promoting the safety, health, happiness, and prosperity of its citizens. On the other hand, it stated that "real Republicans have never believed and never will believe that to be progressive they must also be Socialists or Communists or Reds or members of or in sympathy with other like organizations seeking the overthrow of the institutions which made America great and/or our Constitution, which has made the United States the foremost nation of the world."⁶

In mid-August Federal Reserve Board member and Iowan Edward H. Cunningham wrote to Republican National Committeeman Charles A. Rawson asking about the truth of current Washington rumors that some Iowa Republicans were working to defeat Brookhart. Calling such a possibility "political chicanery," Cunningham told Rawson, "Mr. Brookhart has been overwhelmingly nominated. He has been able to carry the Republican Primaries of Iowa through two very bitter fights and the least I think that the opposition can now do is to at least submit to the will of the people and put all of their strength and support back of that Republican ticket."⁷ Cunningham and Rawson represented the attitude of many "common sense" Republicans de-

5. *Des Moines Register*, 22 June 1924.

6. *Iowa Official Register*, 1925-1926, 308.

7. Cunningham to Rawson, 19 August 1924, Charles A. Rawson Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. A former secretary of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, in 1924 Cunningham was a member of the Federal Reserve Board.

terminated to make the best of a situation they did not like. Others, however, took a different tack. In so doing they brought on the "mish-mash" years.

AN EARLIER RAWSON CORRESPONDENT had indicated the course these irreconcilables would take. Writing on February 8, James J. Lenihan, formerly of Cedar Rapids and now in the Justice Department, complained to Rawson that Brookhart had been voting with the Democrats in the Senate and had spoken favorably of the recently deceased Woodrow Wilson. Lenihan then asked Rawson, since Brookhart was "making such a good Democrat on the Republican ticket, why a Democrat might not be made a good Republican on the Democratic ticket."⁸ Other Republicans were thinking along similar lines, and even before the June primary were beginning a movement to support Democrat Dan Steck for senator.

An Ottumwa lawyer, Steck served from 1912 to 1916 as Wapello County Attorney. In 1917 he enlisted in the Iowa National Guard. Shortly thereafter, he was commissioned by the governor to raise a signal company, and as captain of the 109th Field Signal Battery he saw service in France. After discharge in May 1919, he returned home to his law practice. Like many veterans, he joined the American Legion, rising quickly through the ranks of the Iowa Legion until, at the third state Legion convention, held in September 1921, Steck was elected State Commander. As a delegate to the national convention later that fall he placed the name of Hanford MacNider of Mason City before the convention as National Commander. The convention responded by electing MacNider by acclamation. A month later MacNider wrote to Steck, "I have great faith in you and what you are doing for the Legion in Iowa. We look to you and your Department for inspiration to carry throughout the nation, and we offer you and Iowa all that is within the powers of National Headquarters."⁹

8. Lenihan to Rawson, 8 February 1924, Rawson Papers. I could find no record of any response by Rawson to Lenihan's suggestion.

9. Jacob A. Swisher, *The American Legion in Iowa, 1919-1926* (Iowa City, 1929), 139; MacNider to Steck, 12 December 1921, Hanford MacNider Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch.

Like similar groups in other nations, the Legion was in theory a social service organization, stressing the ideal of war-born comradeship kept alive in continuing bonds of "mutual helpfulness," service to "community, state, and nation," and dedication to correct social principles. According to its constitution, it was to be "absolutely nonpartisan" and was not to engage in the dissemination of partisan literature or advocate any political candidacy.¹⁰ Yet in June 1924, shortly after the Republican National Convention, Hanford MacNider and Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., one of the founders of the American Legion, organized the Republican Service League. Although technically the league was a separate organization, it was always closely allied with the American Legion, and it also quickly formed an alliance with the Republican party. The founders' goals were to ensure that the Republican party would not "atrophy," to rally "the younger element who are more plastic," and to make them "active participaters [*sic*]" in party affairs. As MacNider explained it to B. B. Burnquist, chairman of the Iowa State Republican party, the men involved were "engaged in organizing inside the Republican Party the serviceman generation to sell them the National ticket and to put them actively at work inside the party for the good of all concerned."¹¹

In July Roosevelt met with President Coolidge, who thought that the league was a "very excellent idea." At about the same time, MacNider met with William M. Butler, chairman of the Republican party, to solicit his support. MacNider received assurances that the organization would be taken care of when it established its headquarters in Chicago. From July on MacNider and Roosevelt were in almost daily contact, particularly about funding, or, as MacNider put it, the need to "finance liberally the headquarters in those states which are considered unstable." By election day the Republican National Committee had paid almost \$2,500 for the league's office and travel and had advanced it another \$15,000 for other uses.¹²

10. Swisher, *Legion in Iowa*, 8.

11. Roosevelt, form letter, 5 September 1924; MacNider to B. B. Burnquist, 23 September 1924, Republican Service League, 1924 State File, Iowa: General, MacNider Papers.

12. Roosevelt to MacNider, 18 July 1924; MacNider to Roosevelt, 18 Au-

Defeat of Smith Brookhart

It is not clear who made the suggestion to Dan Steck that he run for United States senator. But on March 21, 1924, he wrote to MacNider about the suggestion and asked for his "frank, open reaction." MacNider was not optimistic. The chances were not good, he thought, of getting "many people in such a solid Republican state to wander across the column" and vote for a Democrat. But he acknowledged the problems that he and the regular Republicans were having and encouraged Steck to seek the Democratic nomination "if you intend to stay with that Party."¹³

Steck left no doubt concerning where his loyalties were. On March 25, he wrote to MacNider, "I am not a party man in the ordinary sense of the term, and am ready to become a MacNider Republican any time you see fit to step forth." Steck announced his candidacy and in the resulting contest won the nomination with 38 percent of the 54,694 votes cast. MacNider was pleased. Writing to Steck on June 6, he expressed his belief that "if the proper organization was built up and enough money could be raised for publicity that you could give old man Brookhart a race for his life."¹⁴

On September 18 Louis Fay, publisher of *Fay's Democrat*, Clinton, Iowa, reported that he had never seen "party lines . . . more loosely drawn than they are this season."¹⁵ Not only were substantial groups of Republicans and Democrats supporting the other party's candidate, there was also speculation that Brookhart might join the third party formed by Robert M. La Follette in his bid for the presidency.¹⁶ The Brookhart forces strongly denied the rumor, of course. Roy Rankin, Brookhart's secretary, called it "an absolute lie made out of the whole cloth,"

gust 1924, 31 August 1924, Republican Service League, 1924 State File, Iowa: General, MacNider Papers: Stubs of Republican National Committee checks, Republican Service League, 1924, General File, Expense Vouchers, MacNider Papers. The expense checks were issued in response to statements presented by the Republican Service League.

13. Steck to MacNider, 21 March 1924; MacNider to Steck, 22 March 1924, Steck, Daniel, MacNider Papers.

14. Steck to MacNider, 25 March 1924; MacNider to Steck, 6 June 1924, *ibid.*; *Iowa Official Register*, 1925-1926, 426-27.

15. Fay to Cummins, 18 September 1924, Albert B. Cummins Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

16. *Des Moines Register*, 22 April 1924.

and Brookhart denied that a rumored meeting on a third party had ever taken place. But Iowa Republicans remained unconvinced, some feeling certain that Brookhart would at least endorse the La Follette candidacy.¹⁷

As the summer ended, however, Brookhart refused to endorse either La Follette or Coolidge, preferring, as the *New York Times* commented, to stay on the fence "until the drear days of November come." In outlook, the *Times* noted, Brookhart seemed more "La Follettian" than La Follette himself. Rawson also observed that many Brookhart supporters were pro-La Follette and that "the kind of speeches [Brookhart] is making are similar to those La Follette makes." But, as Rawson said elsewhere, the senator was "pretty sure of re-election," and remaining on the political fence seemed to be a winning strategy.¹⁸

It took Luther Brewer, a longtime Republican newspaper publisher from Cedar Rapids, to knock Brookhart off the fence. On September 24 Brewer announced his candidacy for the United States Senate. In the announcement he declared, "I am a Republican who believes in President Coolidge . . . a Republican who believes in the preservation of the Constitution, a Republican who has faith in Iowa and her people." Brewer's announcement took Iowa Republican leaders by surprise. They had not been consulted prior to the announcement, and none thought that the state committee would endorse Brewer. James Lenihan wrote that the candidacy was "unpardonable." It created an issue that would not have existed, he wrote, "and gave an excuse to an all-too-willing Brookhart to jump the fence."¹⁹

Lenihan's worst fears were realized when Brookhart came home from a trip to Ohio and proceeded to abandon his policy of declining comment on the national ticket. Jumping off the fence, he landed with one foot squarely on vice-presidential candidate Charles G. Dawes, calling him an "agent of international banking powers" and demanding his resignation from the ticket.

17. Rankin to Rawson, 30 April 1924, Rawson Papers; *Des Moines Register*, 3 May 1924; *New York Times*, 2 May 1924.

18. *New York Times*, 25 July 1924, 29 September 1924; Rawson to Reed Lane, 4 September 1924, Rawson Papers; Rawson to Ray C. Meyer, 30 August 1924, Rawson Papers.

19. *Des Moines Register*, 25 September 1924; Lenihan to Rawson, 15 October 1924, Rawson Papers.

Dawes, he said, "started out like a bold-faced plutogog but his discourtesy and ungentlemanly language quickly reduced him, in his own vocabulary, to a peewit plutogog." The attack produced what the *New York Times* called a "sensation." "The La Follette people," it reported, "were joyous. The Democrats were watching. The Republicans were silent."²⁰

As they waited for the other foot to land, most political observers expected it to come down with an open endorsement of La Follette and an open attack on Coolidge. They were only half right. In Emmetsburg, Iowa, on October 3, Brookhart openly attacked the president and his policies, ticking off a litany of issues on which they differed. "I belong to the farm bloc," he declared. "The President belongs to the Wall Street bloc." The expected endorsement of La Follette, however, did not come. Instead, Brookhart declared that he had "never thought of leaving the party," that his whole soul was "wrapped up in the principles of Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Kenyon." He also restated his convention promise to "do as much for Coolidge as he would for me."²¹

Nevertheless, the Republican State Committee wasted no time in declaring that Brookhart had "bolted" from the party. His speech, it said, constituted an attempt to take over the party machinery and to become the dictator of Iowa politics. The party withdrew formal support, but in practical terms that meant little. Yet the speech and subsequent developments did provide a rallying point for Brookhart's diverse opponents. The regular Republicans, the Republican Service League, and the Democrats each tried to capitalize on the incident.

The Republican Service League came up with a strategy that would prove important in defeating Brookhart. Many Republicans, it felt, would vote for Steck if they could be broken of their habit of voting a straight Republican ticket. To educate them, the league proposed issuing sample ballots that showed an "X" in the circle at the top of the Republican column and an "X" in the square beside Dan Steck's name on the Democratic ticket. The league disseminated the sample ballot throughout Iowa. A number of newspapers ran it on the front page. It was also used as a poster and appeared wherever Republicans might

20. *Des Moines Register*, 25 September 1924; *New York Times*, 2 October 1924.

21. *New York Times*, 4 October 1924.

gather.²² MacNider thought that the sample ballot was "a splendid idea" and hoped that it did "the trick."²³ Still, on November 2 C. C. Clifton, the *Des Moines Register's* political analyst, wrote, "There is little doubt Senator Brookhart will be re-elected."²⁴

For several days after the election, however, it was unclear who had the lead. On the morning of November 6, two days after the election, the *Register* proclaimed that Steck had won by four thousand votes. Brookhart conceded defeat, and Steck issued a victory statement declaring that he owed the election to "loyal Democrats, Republicans who place ideals above party fealty, and service men of all parties." Subsequent returns, however, changed the count, and the next morning the *Register* announced that Brookhart had a lead of 1,116 votes.²⁵

It was apparent that there would be a recount, so Clyde L. Herring, Democratic National Committeeman, moved quickly to insure that ballots and machines would not be tampered with. He also called a strategy meeting in his office, bringing together several prominent Democrats. Others, too, were concerned, and before the meeting ended, as the *Register* described it, a "peculiar drama was enacted." Into the group, "arm in arm," walked the Polk County Republican and Democratic chairmen, "both pulling for the election of Steck and both anxious to have all ballots safeguarded in Steck's interest."²⁶

As the recount progressed the state and country were kept apprised of the results. Page two headlines in the *New York Times* announced on November 8 and 13, "Brookhart Faces Contest," and "Brookhart's Lead Rises to 650."²⁷ On November 24 the recount ended, with Brookhart now leading Steck by 755 votes out of almost nine hundred thousand cast. Accordingly, the State of Iowa declared Brookhart the winner and awarded him a certificate of election.

22. In Brookhart Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, there is a poster taken from a filling station in Tama, on November 9, 1924.

23. MacNider to Lee, 27 October 1924, Republican Service League, 1924 State File, Iowa: General, MacNider Papers.

24. *Des Moines Register*, 2 November 1924.

25. *Des Moines Register*, 6 and 7 November 1924.

26. *Des Moines Register*, 7 November 1924.

27. *New York Times*, 8 and 13 November 1924. See also *ibid.*, 11 and 12 November 1924.

EVEN BEFORE BROOKHART had been issued his certificate of election, his opponents were preparing to contest the results in the Senate.²⁸ The Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections created a special subcommittee to consider the Brookhart-Steck contest. Dan Steck filed a challenge to the election, claiming that many ballots were wrongly counted and that others that should have been counted were not. The Iowa Republican State Central Committee also contested the election, charging that Brookhart was not in fact a Republican and had therefore been elected under false pretenses.²⁹

The subcommittee met on July 20, 1925, but the meeting lasted only long enough to order that a recount be taken of all the ballots. "Many ballots," the subcommittee decided, were rejected in Iowa "on the illegal and fraudulent pretext that they bore distinguishing marks."³⁰ Prominent among the ballots with "distinguishing marks" were the so-called arrow ballots, created when voters literally reproduced the arrows that some of the newspapers had drawn from the Republican side of sample ballots to Steck's name.³¹ Since Iowa's attorney general had ruled that Iowa law forbade any identification mark on the ballot, those ballots had not been allowed during the official canvas in Iowa.

The counters then examined each of the nine hundred thousand ballots cast, seeking, as instructed by the committee, to ascertain the intent of the voter. This meant that they ignored the Iowa law about distinguishing marks. The "arrow ballots," which were counted for Steck since that was what the voters had intended, provided a winning margin for Steck. Thus, the committee declared that Daniel F. Steck, and not Smith W.

28. Governor Kendall sent the certificate to Cummins, telling the senator it was done "as required by the rules of the Senate as I interpret them." Kendall to Cummins, 8 December 1924, General Correspondence, Governor Kendall Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

29. U.S., Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Hearings*, 69th Cong., 1st sess., 1925, 117.

30. *Ibid.*, 9-10.

31. The *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* printed the sample ballot on page one of its November 2 issue. Beneath the ballot was a caption explaining that here was reproduced "a ballot correctly marked" to scratch a ticket. Many voters no doubt felt that to "correctly mark" their ballots they needed to include the arrow shown on the sample.

Brookhart, was elected in 1924 and was therefore entitled to a seat in the United States Senate from Iowa.³²

While the counters and the committee spent the summer and fall doing their job, Hanford MacNider was busy pleading Steck's case. As early as February 1925 he had been in Washington calling on senators. And following his appointment as assistant secretary of war in the fall of 1925, he acquired a privileged platform from which to operate. In early September he wrote to Steck, "Those closest to the President know what kind of fellow you are because I have made it a point to see that they did." This seems to have been particularly true of Senator William M. Butler, who had been appointed to the Senate in November 1924 to fill the vacancy created by the death of Henry Cabot Lodge and to become, in the words of William Allen White, the president's "vicegerent." Steck and MacNider hoped that he would continue to be a valuable ally. "It is my opinion," Steck wrote to MacNider, "that if it comes to a contest on the floor of the Senate, that the administration's wishes will prevail, and that Senator Butler speaks for the administration."³³

At the same time, the Republican Service League was working on Senator Cummins to insure that he would not support his Senate colleague. Writing to the senator in December 1925, the league's state chairman, Charles B. Robbins, indicated that the

32. Brookhart challenged the committee's procedures on three grounds. (1) He said the committee had no right to ignore Iowa law regarding "extraneous marks" on ballots (like the arrow ballots). (2) He also said the committee had failed to count a number of ballots that Brookhart contended were properly marked according to Iowa law. The committee held, however, that the intent of the voter could not be precisely determined in those cases, so the ballots were not counted. (3) Finally, Brookhart charged that although all the packets of ballots had been sealed in Iowa before shipping, some seals were broken when the packets arrived in Washington, D.C. Without actually claiming that the ballots had been tampered with, he said that that possibility existed and that therefore the outcome was possibly flawed. The committee determined that the seals had broken accidentally in transit. In all three cases, the committee rejected Brookhart's challenges, and the full Senate upheld the committee report. U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Report of the Committee Together with Minority View*, 69th Cong., 1st sess., 1926.

33. Steck to MacNider, 18 February 1925; MacNider to Steck, 3 September 1925, Steck, Daniel, MacNider Papers; Steck to MacNider, 13 January 1926, Steck, Daniel, MacNider Papers; William Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon* (New York, 1938), 309.

one hundred thousand men and women of the Republican Service League in Iowa wanted Steck seated and would "resent" any "political expediency" in favor of Brookhart.³⁴ In February 1926, following MacNider's request for a "barrage" from Iowa, the campaign intensified. Robbins wrote on behalf of the Republican Service League of the second district. Other letters arrived from various parts of the state.³⁵

Cummins, though, was in a delicate situation. He was up for reelection in the June 1926 primary, and it was well known that if Brookhart were unseated he would also be a candidate in the primary. So a vote to seat Brookhart would appear as an effort to avoid facing him. A vote to unseat him, on the other hand, could be interpreted as vindictive. Nor could Cummins, as some suggested, allow the matter to be delayed in the Senate beyond the filing date for the primary. This, too, would appear as though Cummins were afraid to face Brookhart. To Cummins neutrality seemed the best course to follow. As early as February 1925 he had taken the position that the contest was a judicial question requiring a determination based on the facts, and time and again he was forced to explain that position. As he told *Cedar Rapids Gazette* editor Verne Marshall in January 1926, he was having trouble making either friends or enemies believe that he was a "reasonable, honest man." Still, he thought, the matter ought to be settled according to the facts, whatever the consequences. He intended, at least to have the approval of his "own conscience."³⁶

On March 27, 1926, the Committee on Privileges and Elections reported out the resolution, and on April 5 the Senate began floor debate. Although the committee favored seating Steck, approval by the full Senate was by no means certain, es-

34. Robbins to Cummins, 29 December 1925, Cummins Papers. Robbins apparently exaggerated the membership figure for Cummins's benefit. On January 18, 1926, Robbins wrote to MacNider and reported that the "strength of organization is 45,000 men, plenty of pep, prestige and enthusiasm." Robbins would be more likely to give MacNider an accurate number and to inflate the membership to lobby Cummins. However, 45,000 men, if properly organized, would have been a potent force. Robbins to MacNider, 18 January 1926, General Correspondence, MacNider Papers.

35. MacNider to Steck, 1 February 1926, Steck, Daniel, MacNider Papers; Various writers to Cummins, February 1926, Cummins Papers.

36. *Des Moines Register*, 6 February 1925; Cummins to Verne Marshall, 31 January 1926, Cummins Papers.

pecially since Senator Butler and the regular Republicans feared that seating Steck would lead Brookhart to enter the Iowa primary that June, when he might well defeat Cummins, who was running for reelection. This could result in a replay of the 1924 elections; regular Republicans might again align themselves with the Democrats and elect another Democrat from Iowa.³⁷

Meanwhile, Hanford MacNider was busy lobbying for Steck, building, as he said, "little bonfires wherever possible." In late March, he was "as nervous as a witch about the outcome."³⁸ He decided to concentrate particularly on Senator Butler, who was reluctantly supporting Brookhart. MacNider arranged for "numerous" telegrams to be sent to Butler.³⁹ By Wednesday, April 7, Butler was beginning to waver in his support of Brookhart. His weakening stance, when coupled with MacNider's activities as a member of the administration, lent considerable credence to the rumors that the president himself wanted Brookhart unseated.⁴⁰ During the first few days of the debate, MacNider was out of Washington. Returning on April 9, he quickly went to Capitol Hill and proceeded to light more "bonfires."⁴¹ By that time the Iowa Democratic and Republican organizations had both endorsed Steck.

Under the rules adopted, the Senate was to close debate and vote at 5:00 P.M. on Monday, April 12. By mid-afternoon that day the galleries were filled. Among the Iowans present were Hanford MacNider, his wife, and E. J. Feuling, Iowa Democratic

37. *Des Moines Register*, 6 April 1926; *New York Times*, 8 April 1926.

38. MacNider to Steck, 20 March 1926, Steck, Daniel, MacNider Papers; MacNider to Halligan, 23 March 1926, Halligan, Bert L., MacNider Papers. MacNider's anxiety increased as the days passed. On April 1 he wrote to Robbins, "Dan's case comes before the Senate today and I am shivering like a dog full of fish hooks. . . . [added in pencil] Tomorrow they say now—perhaps Monday—Damn em." MacNider to Robbins, 1 April 1926, Robbins, C. B., MacNider Papers.

39. Robbins to MacNider, 6 April 1926, Robbins, C. B., MacNider Papers.

40. The *New York Times* reported (8 April 1926) that there were rumors in the Senate cloakrooms that the president had "read the riot act" to Butler, insisting that Steck should be seated. The next day (9 April 1926) the *Times* reported that this allegation was denied, but that the rumors persisted.

41. MacNider spent Saturday, April 10, in the Senate lobby talking with senators and urging them to vote for Steck. It is known that he talked with Senators David A. Reed (R-PA), George H. Moses (R-NH), Porter H. Dale (R-VT), Frank B. Willis (R-OH), and Simeon D. Fess (R-OH), as well as Butler. Telegram to *Sioux City Tribune*, 12 May 1926, Kelly, John H., MacNider Papers.

Defeat of Smith Brookhart

state chairman. The action was frantic. As MacNider later described it, "At 3 o'clock we were two down; at 3:30 one up; at 4:00 one down and, just before the vote, we thought we were two up. Three men changed their vote on the floor, from what they had told us in advance. We nearly all had heart failure before it was over."⁴² The final vote was forty-five for the resolution to seat Steck and forty-one opposed. Sixteen Republicans, including Butler, joined twenty-nine Democrats to vote for Steck. Brookhart had the support of thirty-one Republicans, nine Democrats, and the one Farmer-Laborite, Henrik Shipstead of Minnesota.⁴³ Neither Brookhart nor Cummins participated in the debate, and neither voted. Steck was waiting close by, and almost immediately after the vote he was escorted down the aisle by Senator Cummins and sworn in by Vice-President Dawes.

MacNider received credit for the outcome. Within the hour one Iowan telegraphed MacNider, "Three rousing cheers. News just came. You are the man who put it over." Others were equally enthusiastic. MacNider was thanked for a "truly wonderful victory," and congratulated on his efforts "to retire Mr. Brookhart from the Senate." The most effusive letter came from E. J. Feuling. "I appreciate . . . the most effective help you gave to the cause. . . . May I say, Jack, that I love you, and I am for you all over, yes a hundred percent . . . in fact you are the salt of the earth." MacNider assured Feuling that he would "gladly do the whole thing over again . . . for old man Steck." Other observers echoed the opinion of MacNider's correspondents about his role in the contest. One old friend wrote to Cummins that the Legion in Iowa was "pretty loud in its protest" against Brookhart's being seated; Butler and the Republican National Committee, he noted, had encouraged the Legion's opposition and "actually furnished the money." Similarly, in its explanation of what had happened, the *Register* concluded that "the President was reached effectively from Iowa, under the leadership of Hanford MacNider, and he being convinced that Brookhart ought not to be seated, the New England group led by Butler joined the Steck forces."⁴⁴

42. MacNider to Marshall, 16 April 1926, Marshall, Verne, MacNider Papers.

43. *Congressional Record*, 69th Cong., 1st sess., 1926, 7301.

44. Robbins to MacNider, 12 April 1926, Robbins, C. B., MacNider Pa-

There is no doubt that Smith Brookhart won the election in 1924. The first count of the vote showed that he did, and this was reaffirmed by the official canvass following the election. Brookhart received a certificate of election from the state of Iowa. For most electees this would have been enough. Why, then, did the United States Senate vote to unseat Brookhart? The answer lies almost solely in the effort of Hanford MacNider and the Republican Service League and its connections within the American Legion.⁴⁵ Other groups also wanted Brookhart out, and both political parties in Iowa joined in an effort to oust him, but the guiding force was MacNider. The leaders of the League in Iowa did little without informing MacNider or first checking it with him. It was MacNider who raised money, and it was MacNider who kept the White House informed.

In Washington MacNider dealt frequently with Senator Butler, and probably caused Butler's change of mind during the senatorial debate. The president was certainly involved in the process as well. Clearly, Brookhart's continuing presence in the Senate was a source of irritation for the president. Even before the Emmetsburg speech there had been little empathy between

pers; W. F. Zumbrunn to MacNider, 13 April 1926, Steck, Daniel, MacNider Papers; William C. McArthur to MacNider, 14 April 1926, Campaign: 1926 Brookhart-Cummins, MacNider Papers; MacNider to Feuling, 1 May 1926, *ibid.*; Feuling to MacNider, 28 April 1926, *ibid.*; MacNider to Feuling, 1 May 1926, *ibid.*; Ed J. Kelly to Cummins, 15 April 1926, Cummins Papers; *Des Moines Register*, 17 April 1926.

45. The American Legion maintained for the record its position of nonpartisanship. In an editorial on April 23, 1926, the *Iowa Legionaire*, the official publication of the Iowa department, took exception to an International News Service story that attributed Steck's success to three causes, one being MacNider and his ability "to bring American Legion pressure against the Iowa insurgent." The editorial went on to restate that political activity was prohibited by the constitution of the American Legion. It argued further that one Legion post had supported Brookhart, thus proving that the Legion was not mobilized against him. These denials aside, it is clear that the American Legion posts throughout the country played a role in lobbying for the defeat of Brookhart. Two Brookhart supporters, George Norris (R-NE) and Hubert D. Stephens (D-MS), later agreed it was a "matter of general knowledge in the Senate" that Legionnaires in many states were contacting their senators to vote against Brookhart. According to later reports from the Senate, two senators, "convinced by the reports and the debate that Brookhart" had "been elected and should [have been] seated," bowed to the pressure from American Legion officials in their states and voted for Steck. Telegram to *Sioux City Tribune*, 12 May 1926, Kelly, John H., MacNider Papers.

the two men, and despite the president's pose of disdain about such things, he was, as one biographer put it, "no innocent" when it came to playing the political game. He was undoubtedly receptive when MacNider used his position in the administration to press the case for Steck, and preceding Butler's change of position there were talks between the president and his "spokesman in the Senate."⁴⁶ Of course, both men subsequently issued statements denying presidential interference.⁴⁷ But circumstantial evidence clearly indicates White House intervention with Butler and a key role for MacNider in the process.⁴⁸

MACNIDER had scored only a Pyrrhic victory, however. The "mish-mash" of 1924 now became even more confused, and the twisted path of Iowa politics took still another turn as former Senator Brookhart packed his bags to return to Iowa and on April 17 to announce his candidacy at a rally in Washington. The introduction by the Reverend Carl W. Klein set the theme for the campaign. The primary, Klein said, would determine whether senators from Iowa would be "chosen under state laws or in an arbitrary way by the Senate."⁴⁹

Cummins probably would not have run for reelection in 1926 if circumstances had been different. Writing to various correspondents in 1924, he had expressed concerns about his health and age, saying that he was determined not to spend the years of his "decadence, either physical or mental, in public office."⁵⁰ In August 1925 a visitor reported the seventy-five-

46. White, *Puritan in Babylon*, 264, 319.

47. *New York Times*, 8 and 9 April 1926.

48. Ronald F. Briley, "Smith W. Brookhart and the Limitations of Senatorial Dissent," *Annals of Iowa* 48 (1985), 56-79, attributed Brookhart's unseating to the desire of Senate Republicans to rid themselves of a troublesome maverick who had not played by their rules. Following the earlier assessment of Ray Tucker and Frederick R. Barkley in *Sons of the Wild Jackass* (Boston, 1932), 364, Briley claims that the Republican administration preferred a "conservative Democrat to a radical Republican" (74). As I argue here, however, the Republican leadership in the Senate voted against Brookhart only after intense lobbying by Hanford MacNider and the Republican Service League. The unseating of Smith Brookhart was more a function of Iowa political tensions than a punitive action by the United States Senate.

49. *Washington Evening Journal*, 19 April 1926.

50. Cummins to James Blythe (brother of CB&Q General Counsel Joseph W. Blythe), 28 February 1924, Cummins Papers; Cummins to Bert Keltz, 28 November 1924, Cummins Papers.

year-old senator to be "feeble" and highly unlikely to "live out another term."⁵¹ If Cummins had announced early on that he would not be a candidate, no one would have thought anything of it, but once the Brookhart matter had come to a head, he felt compelled, although "not very keen," to "make the fight."⁵² By mid-March he had decided to run and was soon trying to convince others that he was up to it.

Throughout the campaign Cummins stayed in Washington, delivering his only speech over a statewide radio hookup. In the speech he attacked Brookhart by name, charging that his legislative record was nil and that his criticism of the Transportation Act was misinformed and unjustified.⁵³ The speech, though, followed one by Brookhart, allowing listeners to note the sharp contrast between Cummins's feebleness and Brookhart's vigor. Cummins's speech was also permeated with an uneasy nervousness, indicating that he did not like or trust the new medium. Apparently, he found it difficult to believe that he could speak in Washington, D.C., and actually be heard in Iowa.⁵⁴

Over four hundred thousand Iowans went to the polls on primary day. Almost half of them (49.46 percent) voted for Brookhart. Cummins received 32.52 percent, and three other candidates split the rest.⁵⁵ Expressing many Iowans' feelings about the election, one Polk County farmer commented, "we sent Brookhart to Washington and we're going to send him back. We'll show the Senate that when we have sent a man down there we'll see to calling him home when we want him."⁵⁶

Returning to the nation's capital, Brookhart exercised the privilege of a former senator and sat in a desk on the Senate floor. He was greeted warmly by many senators, but Albert Cummins, sitting just four desks away, refused to look at him. Displaying a wide grin, Brookhart told friends that "fighting in a good cause" was a "great tonic," adding that he had gained about

51. Robbins to MacNider, 28 August 1925, Robbins, C. B., MacNider Papers.

52. Cummins to Burt Thompson, 1 March 1926, Cummins Papers.

53. *Des Moines Register*, 5 June 1926.

54. Ralph Mills Sayre, "Albert Baird Cummins and the Progressive Movement in Iowa," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1958), 551.

55. *Iowa Official Register*, 1927-1928, 348-49.

56. *Des Moines Register*, 9 June 1926.

Defeat of Smith Brookhart

ten pounds during the campaign.⁵⁷ Soon he was back in Iowa, where Iowa Republicans were using the remaining weeks of June and the first weeks of July as a respite before gathering in Des Moines for the state convention.

As delegates gathered in Des Moines, the Brookhart forces made no organized move to take over, although understandably some of his supporters sought seats on the state central committee. In their search for harmony, Brookhart's supporters also decided not to contest the contents of the platform. Perhaps thinking of the future, both sides now seemed determined to avoid more rancor. If old hatchets were not buried, said *Register* political reporter C. C. Clifton, at least their "sharply tempered edges" were "for the time being . . . sheathed."⁵⁸ In the end, there was enough compromise at the convention to satisfy both sides.

During the convention, Brookhart was seated at the rear of the platform. He was not scheduled to speak. But when he was finally persuaded to say a few words, he said he had come to the conventions for six years with a prepared speech that he had never been allowed to give:

Six years ago I was defeated for Senator, and I couldn't even get inside the convention. Four years ago I was successful, and I was allowed in the last row on the floor. Two years ago I won out again, and was allowed to sit with my county convention that time. This year I won again, and here I am, up square on the platform—positive evidence of the slow but sure advance of civilization.⁵⁹

Everything considered, the convention was a remarkable display of unity. About the only statewide Republican leader not seen shaking Brookhart's hand was Cummins, who did not attend the convention at all. Even Dante Pierce, editor of the *Iowa Homestead* and a former Brookhart supporter, was forced to admit that Brookhart's support by the convention marked the "termination of the party split . . . evident since Colonel Brookhart's first candidacy in 1920."⁶⁰

57. *Des Moines Register*, 13 and 21 June 1926.

58. *Des Moines Register*, 20 June, 18, 20, and 21 July 1926.

59. *The Union Advocate*, 5 August 1926.

60. *Iowa Homestead*, 29 July 1926.

Seemingly, Cummins's loss and absence from the convention freed delegates to put aside old quarrels and look ahead to the need for unified action in the presidential race of 1928. If they were not all happy with Brookhart, most felt that, barring another Emmetsburg, which no one honestly expected, they were going to have Brookhart for six more years. Resigned to that fact, they went home feeling that everything was settled.

Then, on July 30, Albert Baird Cummins died. With tributes pouring in, Iowa's political leaders, including Brookhart, gathered in Des Moines for the funeral. In a statement about Cummins issued earlier, Brookhart had said, "The greater part of my political life was spent fighting side by side with Senator Cummins. . . . [The] later disagreement between us will never wipe out the memories of those days. His picture hangs by the picture of Lincoln in my office where it has hung since the beginning of our acquaintance."⁶¹

Because Cummins's term still had seven months to go, political observers immediately began speculating about the identity of the person who would be selected to serve out the term. Under Iowa law the governor could appoint someone to serve until the next regular election, which in this case was only three months away. But the remaining four months, the "short term," as it came to be known, must be served by an electee, which meant that the Republicans would have to hold another convention and nominate another senatorial candidate.

Brookhart considered seeking the short-term nomination, but realized that the pro-Brookhart sentiments at the earlier convention were no guarantee that he could get a majority of the delegates to support such a bid. He also realized that making the bid and losing might well imperil his chances at the full term in the general election. Accordingly, he decided not to take a chance with a convention he knew to be filled with Cummins men, who, it seemed possible, might reject him in order to honor the memory of their dead hero. The convention eventually selected the relatively unknown David W. Stewart, a Sioux City attorney.⁶²

61. *Des Moines Register*, 31 July 1926.

62. *Des Moines Capital*, 6 and 7 August 1926.

Defeat of Smith Brookhart

Brookhart won an easy victory in the fall election. The *Register* called his election a "celebration of his reunion with the Party." Republican Chairman Willis Stern hailed it as marking the end of the "factional strife" that had enabled the Democrats to gain a foothold in the Senate two years before.⁶³ And Brookhart's associates used the occasion to promise that he would continue to work for party unity.

BROOKHART acted boldly but foolishly when he ran against Cummins in 1920. His losing effort only served to earn him the opposition of regular members of the Republican party. In 1922 he tried to play the game by the accepted rules, working hard to line up the support of various groups in the state. When that failed, however, he became embittered, charged betrayal on the part of organizational and party leaders who flooded the field against him, and determined to go directly to the people, which enabled him to win.

Consequently, between 1924 and 1926, those in charge of the established political machinery united to defeat Brookhart. In part they acted out of fear of his program; some really believed that it would lead to socialism or worse. In part they feared that he intended to remake the Republican party in his own image, a charge he repeatedly denied and one that most thoughtful politicians knew to be unfounded since he never bothered to build the kind of county-by-county organizations necessary for such a move.⁶⁴ In addition, party leaders were upset that he won without them and thus showed that the political party was not necessary as the vehicle for election. Brookhart aided their efforts by his intemperate speech at Emmetsburg, giving them an excuse to read him out of the party.

63. *Des Moines Register*, 3 November 1926.

64. Arthur F. Allen wrote to a friend in August 1926 that it was "practically certain" that Brookhart would win the election. The fact that he did not get the nomination for the short term was "not to be regarded as an indication of changed sentiment" about Brookhart, Allen said, adding, "Brookhart, in his way, is a shrewd politician." Like Cummins in 1901, Brookhart made his appeal directly to the people. Cummins, however, was careful to see that his supporters were elected as delegates to the county conventions. Brookhart, Allen continued, had "neglected county conventions." Allen to George Roberts, 31 August 1926, Arthur Francis Allen Papers, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.

By the end of 1926, though, the "mish-mash" of the last two years had been replaced by the closest thing to party unity that Iowa Republicans had known for years. Although it could be seen as more facade than substance, unity had become the hope of those bruised by years of internecine war and anxious to put such battles behind them: it was the hope around which plans for 1928 were being built. Those involved could take heart from the realization that Smith Brookhart would not be on a ballot for another six years.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.