

THE CUMMINS-CANNON CONTROVERSY OF 1909

By *Waldo W. Braden*

At the opening of the present century progressives and conservatives struggled for control within both major parties. In 1896 the Democrats had succumbed to William Jennings Bryan and the liberals, but conservative Republicans, firmly entrenched, were slower to give way. In 1909 insurgency showed itself in force in both houses during the special session of the Sixty-first Congress. The rebellious Middle Western Senators, under the leadership of Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, and Jonathan P. Dolliver and Albert B. Cummins of Iowa, broke with the administration over the passage of the Payne-Aldrich tariff. In the House of Representatives the dictatorial tactics of Speaker Joseph Cannon caused insurrection.

Newspapers and magazines had labeled Cannon a czar and a tyrant and had charged that he was primarily interested in promoting the welfare of the large corporations. Many Iowa Congressmen held him responsible for the failure of Congress to carry out what they considered the campaign promises of 1908.

These struggles were reflected locally throughout the nation. In Iowa this outbreak of hostilities was not surprising, for in every Congressional district the progressives and standpatters had for some years been calling each other names and hotly contesting each election. Sensing the dramatic aspects of the quarrel, the citizens of Knoxville, Iowa, invited Joseph Cannon and Albert Baird Cummins to address homecoming crowds on successive days, October 5 and October 6, 1909, at the third annual Old Home Week. They were eager to see what would happen when the Iowa junior Senator, who had recently attracted so much attention for his fearless and outspoken opposition to the Payne-Aldrich tariff, met the colorful "Uncle Joe" Cannon, aptly called "the worst hated man on earth."¹

Knoxville's Old Home Week was a typical Iowa fall festival with a carni-

¹ *Des Moines Capital*, Sept. 27, 1909. The newest work on Cannon is Blair Bolles, *Tyrant from Illinois: Uncle Joe Cannon's Experiment with Personal Power* (New York, 1951).

val, concessions, barkers, bands, and parades. Farmers' Day opened the festivities on October 5, and drew a crowd estimated at ten to twelve thousand persons.² First in the afternoon came the Farmers' Parade, including entries for the best float depicting farm life, the best four-horse team, the best decorated carriage, the biggest team of horses, the best pony rig, the best driving team, the best draft foal of 1909, the best mule team, and the best mounted company of ten persons.³ After the parade, the onlookers hurried to the opera house to see and to hear the famous Joseph Cannon. Every available seat was taken; standing room was at a premium.⁴

The original plan was for the speaker to address the crowd from a platform erected east of the Marion County courthouse. Cannon, however, preferred to speak inside; he stated that he did not wish to face "the autumn wind that whistled around the courthouse." Although this gave him a better opportunity for effective speaking, he limited his audience considerably by the decision.

At two o'clock Cam Culbertson, Republican County Chairman, called the meeting to order and introduced Congressman J. H. T. Hull, Representative of the district, as chairman of the day. After the crowd sang "America," Mr. Hull spoke briefly "paying his respects to the critics of President Taft" and declaring that Mr. Cannon was the most benevolent czar that he had "known in his sixteen years experience as a congressman."⁵ Then followed Cannon's two-hour address on "The Rules of the House."

In this address Cannon first attempted to justify his interpretation of the "Rules," stressing the importance of cooperation in conducting business. He ridiculed the charge that he was a "czar" by countering that every Speaker during the thirty-eight years of his service in Congress had been accused of packing the committees. Long trained in the rough-and-tumble school of invective, he knew the value of *reductio ad absurdum*. He claimed that these charges were "the invention of the minority" set on making political capital of his position.

After finishing his ethical proof — that is, answering the charges against his character — he turned to a consideration of the Payne-Aldrich tariff, the paramount issue. First, he reviewed the history of the Republican tariff and

² Knoxville Journal, Oct. 8, 1909.

³ Ibid., Sept. 24, 1909.

⁴ Ibid., Oct. 8, 1909.

⁵ Ottumwa Daily Courier, Oct. 6, 1909.

asserted that high tariffs had contributed to the prosperity of the country. Secondly, he attempted to prove that the recently enacted tariff was a good law in spite of its limitations and that it fulfilled the Republican campaign promise of 1908. He maintained that Cummins and Dolliver, by their opposition, had "practically joined hands with Bryan." He knew that Cummins could not overlook this charge.⁶

In brief, Cannon had done two things. First, he had shown that the volume of business demanded that the Speaker take the lead in legislative procedure; therefore, the insurgents were unjust in their condemnation of him. Secondly, he pointed out that the Payne-Aldrich tariff was passed by the majority and signed by the President; the insurgents, in refusing to support the majority, had betrayed the party; and therefore, in the coming election they should not be supported by the Republican electorate.

Albert B. Cummins spoke on Fraternal Day, the second day of the Knoxville homecoming. Preceding his address there was a talk at 11:00 A. M. by John P. White, president of the United Mine Workers, District Thirteen, and at 1:00 P. M., the Fraternal Parade sponsored by the lodges and clubs of the town.⁷

Cummins had arrived that morning by train from Des Moines and had gone directly to the Parsons House where he spent the remainder of the morning interviewing friends. At noon he was the guest at a businessmen's luncheon, "strictly non-partisan," at which there were eighteen present "representing the four banks, both newspapers, and other business men of the city." At 1:00 P. M., from the veranda of the Parsons House, Cummins and his party reviewed the Fraternal Parade, the most colorful and the most elaborate event of the celebration. Said the *Knoxville Journal*: "There were dozens of handsomely decorated equipages, splendidly caparisoned horses, fair women and brave men in the procession, and their appearance evoked a continuous volley of applause all along the line."

Not following the example of the Illinois Congressman, Cummins chose to face the "autumn winds." He addressed the crowd, which had to stand, from a platform erected in the square east of the courthouse. Here he had to compete with the noises of the carnival, and a reporter stated that fewer

⁶ *Des Moines Capital*, Oct. 7, 1909; *Des Moines Register and Leader*, Oct. 6, 1909. For a discussion of the Payne-Aldrich Tariff, see George Mowry, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Movement* (Madison, Wisc., 1946), Chap. II.

⁷ *Knoxville Journal*, Sept. 24, Oct. 8, 1909.

people heard "Senator Cummins uninterruptedly than listened to Mr. Cannon Tuesday, but a great many more saw the Senator and heard parts of his address than got to view the Speaker of the House."⁸

In many respects the audience which Albert B. Cummins addressed on October 6, 1909, was similar to the one Cannon had faced the previous day. The great majority of his listeners were farmers, miners, and townspeople of Marion County. Cannon undoubtedly drew more standpat Republicans, while in their stead, Cummins attracted the enthusiastic progressive Republicans. Nevertheless, many who heard Cannon probably returned to hear Cummins' answer. As a whole, this audience was probably more friendly to Cummins than to Cannon. These people knew their Senator, who in the past had demonstrated his intelligence, his character, and his good will. In the previous primary a majority of the Republicans of Marion County had favored S. F. Prouty, the progressive Republican, in preference to Representative Hull, the standpat candidate, and had given Prouty a plurality of 259 votes over Hull. In the six counties of the fifth Congressional district (Story, Dallas, Polk, Madison, Warren, and Marion), Hull had won, however, but by the narrow margin of only 44 votes, which would indicate that the district leaned toward the progressive point of view.⁹

Cummins welcomed the opportunity of exchanging blows with Cannon before an Iowa audience. Upon his return to Iowa, the Senator had addressed several gatherings, defending his stand in the recent session and proposing a program for the progressives. Naturally he was eager to widen the scope of attention he was receiving. Therefore he went to Knoxville with the determined purpose "to kick up a row. . . ."¹⁰

From the beginning of his speech this aggressive spirit was evident. He told the audience that, although he had been too young to enter the Civil War and too old for the Spanish-American War, and therefore had never been in battle, yet he recognized how the soldiers in the poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" felt:

Cannon to the right of them,
Cannon to the left of them,
Volleyed and thundered.

⁸ Cedar Rapids *Evening Gazette*, Oct. 6, 1909.

⁹ Knoxville *Journal*, Sept. 3, 1909.

¹⁰ Cummins to Albert J. Beveridge, quoted by Claude Bowers, *Beveridge and the Progressive Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), 372-3.

Then, after paying an eloquent tribute to Iowa and its people, Cummins launched into a refutation of the stand taken by Cannon. First he attacked his defense of the rules of the House, arguing that a justification of an institution because it is old is no justification at all. Caustically he said: ". . . I am not going to bow down to any God simply because it was worshipped years ago and it is covered with a veil of antiquity." Six of ten Representatives from Iowa, he reminded his listeners, were among the "brave and adventurous spirits" who dared challenge "Uncle Joe's" power. He charged that Cannon had dominated legislation by controlling the Committee on Rules, giving as a specific example the Payne-Aldrich tariff in which the Speaker of the House had permitted a discussion of only seven out of five thousand items. To challenge Cannon was a sure way, he revealed, of losing a desirable committee appointment. Therefore, thundered Cummins, the Speaker "had the members in the hollow of his hand." Here was the fire and energy that made Cummins a force on the floor of the Senate. He had hit Cannon in a sensitive spot. To rub salt into the Speaker's wounds, he concluded with a rhetorical question: "When you send men down to Washington to represent the people of Iowa, don't you think they ought to have a right to express their opinions and their objections if they have them?"

Cummins believed that "A good offense is a good defense." Now that he had put his opponent on the defensive, he turned to justify his opposition to the Payne-Aldrich tariff. Avoiding a detailed analysis of the complex tariff schedules and a defense of the Senate insurgency, he resorted to the tricks of political oratory by playing upon the prejudices of his listeners. Aggressively he accepted Cannon's challenge by saying that he believed that "after the other fellow smites you on the cheek, the thing to do is to go right in and soak him on the solar plexus. . . ." Had he "practically joined hands with Bryan and the Democrats"? He affirmed his belief in protectionism and then charged that Cannon, Aldrich, and the standpatters were favoring the great corporations and the railroads. He knew his audience of farmers and miners would accept this assertion without proof. For twenty years he and other Iowa progressives had hammered on the relationship between high tariff and big business.

In conclusion Cummins restated his adherence to Republicanism: ". . . in doing as I did my heart was beating as true for the Republican party as ever it beat for family or friends. I never performed an act in my

life for which my conscience so completely justifies me as in voting against that bill. I want a Republican tariff measured according to the Republican platform and until I get it or approximate it, my vote will never be cast for a tariff bill."¹¹

The Knoxville controversy attracted considerable attention and editorial comment in Iowa and neighboring states. The remarks of Cummins were effective enough that Cannon deemed it necessary to reply in an address before the Illinois Mayors' Association at Elgin, Illinois, on October 19. Before an audience of sixty mayors from all parts of Illinois and twelve hundred residents of Elgin, he bitterly assailed the insurgents in general and Cummins and Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin in particular.¹²

In the course of his address he related the story of his fight for re-election the previous November, explained why the insurgents were not Republicans, quoted statistics to prove that the West benefited more than the East under the new tariff law, attempted to show that the Speaker was not a czar but an ordinary presiding officer, and announced his approval of the Payne-Aldrich bill. In reference to the Knoxville controversy, Cannon declared:

I was in Iowa last week. It is an open secret there that Senator Cummins practically proposes to join with Bryan. . . . He says he will not stop until the tariff is revised according to his notion. It is an open secret that Senator Cummins is out in a campaign to defeat every congressman in his state who voted for that bill. . . . Now let's see. Two hundred Republican Representatives voted for that bill, and all Republican senators except seven. I ask whether the opposing Republicans or the rest and President Taft who signed it constitute the Republican party.¹³

In this statement Cannon's purpose was self evident: he was set upon driving the insurgents out of the party and upon bringing about their defeat in the coming election. In another portion of his address he made his stand clearer when he said the issue "appears to be whether the seven Senators and twenty members of the House who voted against the tariff constitute the Republican party or whether the majority of the Republican members of Congress and the President, who signed the bill, make up the Republican

¹¹ *Des Moines Register and Leader*, Oct. 7, 1909.

¹² *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 20, 1909.

¹³ *Elgin Daily News*, Oct. 20, 1909.

party. These people, under the leadership of Senators Cummins and La Follette, call themselves Republicans, but if they are, then I am something else."¹⁴

The following night he again leveled his fire on Cummins, La Follette, and other insurgents by defending the new tariff in an address before the Union League Club at Chicago.¹⁵

The newspapers of Illinois and Iowa commented at length upon Cannon's Elgin address. Most of the Chicago papers summarized his remarks, playing up the angle that he had attempted "to read" Cummins, La Follette, and the insurgents out of the party.¹⁶ Iowa papers broadcast the news of this denunciation to their readers.¹⁷

In the meantime the Marquette Club, under the leadership of its president, Chester Arthur Legg, Chicago attorney, extended an invitation to Cummins to be the main speaker at their annual banquet, thus giving him an opportunity to answer Cannon. Mr. Legg had become interested in Cummins in 1908 when, as a correspondent for the *Boston Transcript*, he had written a series of articles on Iowa politics. At first Cummins was hesitant to accept this invitation. He explained his reluctance on the grounds that the Marquette Club was an "old conservative Republican Club" and since it was "his intention in a single speech to come out boldly against the party leadership in Washington, he preferred to do so in some place where the sentiment was likely to be more sympathetic with such a stand." However, after considerable urging from John P. Kennedy, a Chicago businessman, Cummins accepted the invitation.¹⁸

In the company of Mrs. Cummins, the Senator arrived in Chicago the morning of November 6, ready and eager to resume the battle with his Illinois adversary. During the day he was entertained by the committee and in the afternoon he was taken on an "automobile jaunt around the city." At noon, in a short talk to a group of former Iowans at the Hawkeye Club, he

¹⁴ *Senate Document No. 204, 61 Cong., 2 Sess., Vol. 58; Ottumwa Daily Courier, Oct. 21, 1909.*

¹⁵ *Ottumwa Daily Courier, Oct. 22, 1909; Chicago Inter-Ocean, Oct. 21, 1909.*

¹⁶ See issues of the *Chicago Tribune, Chicago Journal, Chicago Evening Post, Chicago Reporter Herald, and Chicago Inter-Ocean, for Oct. 20, 1909.*

¹⁷ See issues of the *Burlington Hawkeye, Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette, Davenport Daily Times, Oskaloosa Daily Herald, and Sioux City Journal, for Oct. 20, 1909; Sioux City Daily Tribune, Oct. 19, 21, 1909.*

¹⁸ Letter to author from Chester Arthur Legg, November 29, 1937.

touched on many points which he discussed in detail in his evening address and declared that in spite of the assertions of Cannon there were Republicans in Iowa.¹⁹

The banquet, held at the Marquette Club building, was attended by about three hundred. After the dinner the tables were removed in order that others could gain admission. Due to the limited seating capacity of the hall, the committee in charge had to refuse many applications.²⁰

The audience that Cummins faced was radically different from that at Knoxville. Iowa listeners had been farmers, miners, and inhabitants of Knoxville and the other small towns of the locality. They thought of tariff from the standpoint of farm products and consumer prices. They regarded large manufacturers, capitalists, and industrialists with suspicion.

In direct contrast to the Knoxville audience, Cummins now faced a group with urban interests. Among the three or four hundred persons gathered were some of Chicago's most prominent attorneys, merchants, brokers, manufacturers, doctors, newspapermen, and "the leading Republican politicians and party workers in and about Chicago."²¹ They were better informed upon national affairs, upon the tariff in general, and the Payne-Aldrich tariff in particular. They were interested in how the tariff would affect manufacturing, the railroads, the board of trade, the merchandising, and the general prosperity of the city dweller.

As was indicated by his reluctance to accept the Marquette Club invitation, Cummins recognized the importance of this speech. In an interview he had intimated that this would be "his most important public utterance" of the year and that he would outline the "insurgents' plan of campaign" for the coming session.²² He carefully planned his approach, for he knew that he was in the home state of his opponent before a decidedly more sophisticated group than he had faced at Knoxville.

Chester Arthur Legg, president of the club, served as toastmaster. Preceding the main address of the evening, William J. Calhoun, prominent Chicago attorney and member of the club, gave a ten or fifteen minute introductory talk, in which, among other things, he declared:

¹⁹ Ottumwa *Daily Courier*, Nov. 6, 1909.

²⁰ Des Moines *Register and Leader*, Nov. 6, 1909; Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, Nov. 7, 1909.

²¹ Letter from Chester Arthur Legg to author.

²² Ottumwa *Daily Courier*, Nov. 6, 1909.

Regardless of whether the Senator from Iowa is right or wrong in his contentions on the tariff schedules . . . I heartily agree with him that no man has any right to read him out of his party simply because he followed his conscience and voted as he thought right. If he has convictions that party is not following the right course, he has the right to call attention to it. . . . I say he did right not to submit to any caucus or to any coterie of self-assumed leaders.²³

Calhoun set the stage for Cummins. After humorously reviewing the beginning of the controversy, Cummins considered Cannon's charge that the insurgents had "joined hands with Bryan." He met emotional arguments with more emotional appeal, boasting that he represented a staunch Republican state and that it was the duty of the Iowa Republican voters, not the standpatters, to determine if the insurgents had violated the 1908 campaign promise. The Payne-Aldrich tariff had failed, he asserted, in that it did not represent "the difference between the cost of production at home and abroad." The weakness was due, he said, to the lack of an existing agency that could determine what was fair tariff. As a solution he proposed the creation of a tariff commission. Not satisfied with this suggestion alone, he briefly outlined what he considered a progressive program. He recommended reform in the banking system, extension of the Interstate Commerce Act, and additional legislation to control trusts and big business.²⁴

The Marquette Club address was heralded throughout the entire country as a fitting answer to the vituperations of Cannon and as a frank expression of progressive Republicanism. Recognizing the timeliness of Cummins' remarks, many Iowa papers carried full accounts of the affair and published all or a large part of what was said.²⁵ More important, this speech transferred the controversy from one of local concern to one of national interest. Cummins had reached a reading audience extending far beyond the Middle

²³ Chicago *Sunday Record Herald*, Nov. 7, 1909.

²⁴ Speech is presented in full in *Senate Document No. 204*. Cummins had presented this same program on September 14 to the Grant Club at Des Moines in his first speech after his return to Iowa from the special session. *Des Moines Capital*, Sept. 15, 1909.

²⁵ Burlington *Hawkeye*, Nov. 7, 1909; Cedar Rapids *Daily Republican*, Nov. 7, 1909; Cedar Rapids *Evening Gazette*, Nov. 7, 1909; Clinton *Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 8, 1909; Davenport *Daily Times*, Nov. 8, 1909; Dubuque *Daily Times Journal*, Nov. 8, 1909; Dubuque *Telegraph-Herald*, Nov. 6, 7, 1909; Fort Dodge *Messenger*, Nov. 8, 1909; Des Moines *Register and Leader*, Nov. 7, 1909; Sioux City *Journal*, Nov. 7, 1909; Sioux City *Tribune*, Nov. 6, 8, 1909.

West. The magazine *The World Today* called it "the declaration of independence of the insurgents. . . ." ²⁶ *Harper's Weekly* thought it sounded "the right note," and that it was "as simple as it is courageous." ²⁷ *The Nation* declared he had sounded the thoughts of "thousands of Republicans" disappointed with the Payne-Aldrich tariff. ²⁸ Many agreed that Cummins had securely established his position as a leader of the progressive element of the Republican party. ²⁹

In this series of speeches Albert B. Cummins became one of the foremost leaders of the progressive Republicans. Thanks to the invitation of the Knoxville citizens, he was permitted "to cross blades" with a foremost conservative, the much talked of Joseph Cannon, who, already angered by the opposition he encountered in the House of Representatives, took up the challenge. In his attempt to spank the junior Senator from Iowa, Cannon gave Cummins the opportunity he wanted. In a single address before a nationally known political club, Cummins was able to crystallize progressive thinking and to set forth a future program for his wing of the party. His Marquette Club speech also greatly contributed to making Senator Cummins presidential timber for 1912 and 1916.

²⁶ *The World Today*, 17:1241 (December, 1909).

²⁷ *Harper's Weekly*, 53:5 (Nov. 13, 1909).

²⁸ *The Nation*, 89:447 (Nov. 11, 1909).

²⁹ Mark Sullivan, "Editorial," *Colliers*, 44:15 (Nov. 27, 1909); William Allen White, "Insurgents and Their Work," *American Mercury*, 71:394-9 (July 1, 1911).