

# Senator Guy Gillette

## Foils the Execution Committee

by Jerry Harrington

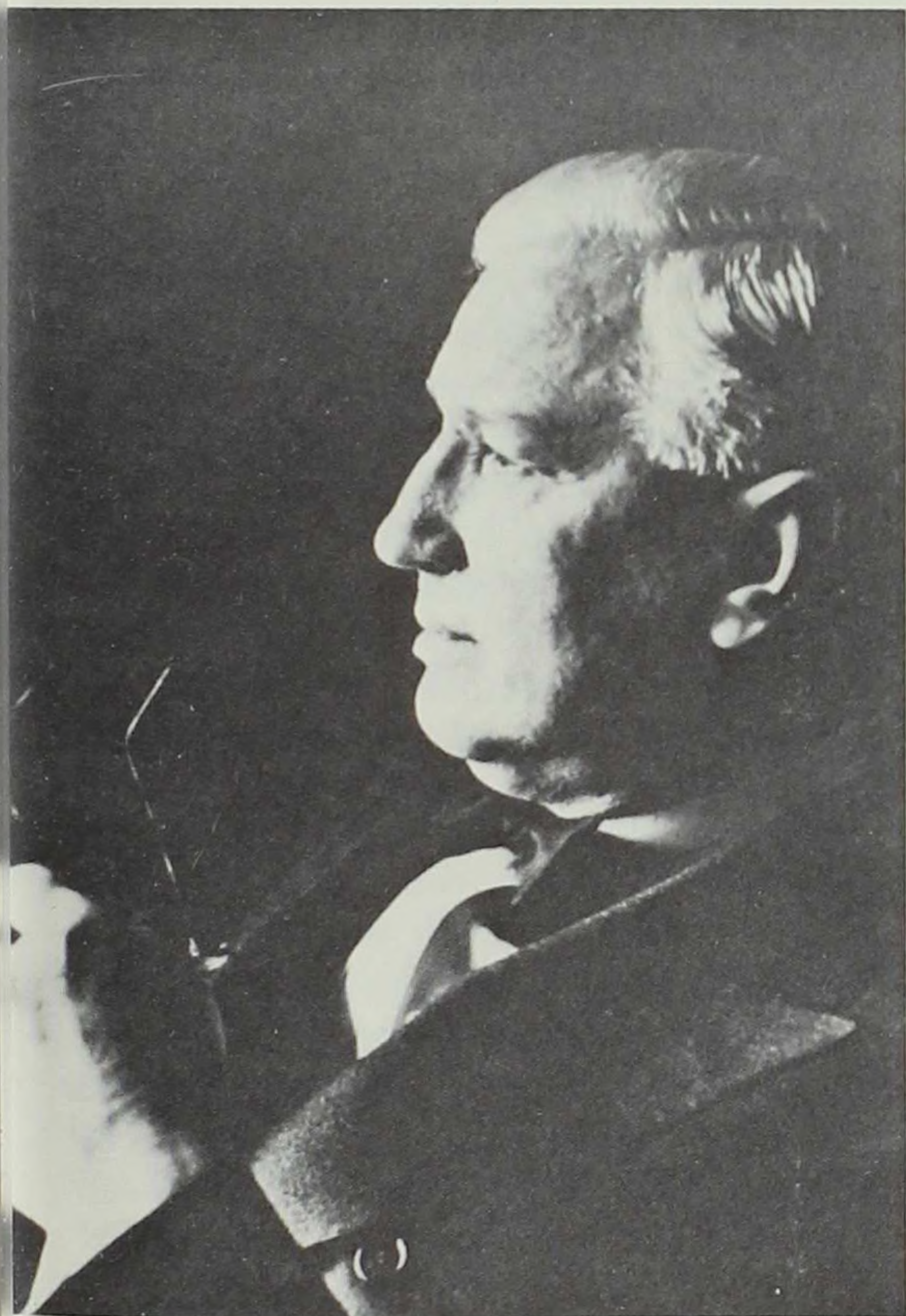
*FDR felt he needed total partisan loyalty if his New Deal programs were to succeed. In his first term, the President relied on the art of persuasion to keep congressional Democrats in line. Later his methods became less subtle.*

Long considered a Republican stronghold, the state of Iowa has on several occasions in its history ignored tradition and sent Democrats to Congress. One such congressman, Guy M. Gillette of Cherokee, challenged the Republican party's twentieth-century domination of state politics with his election in 1932 to the House of Representatives from western Iowa's Ninth District. Gillette's election, of course, coincided with the dramatic victory of Franklin D. Roosevelt over incumbent Republican President Herbert Hoover, a victory that signaled the beginning of the New Deal in the United States. Unlike many of his freshman colleagues in Congress, however, Guy Gillette stood somewhat outside the New Deal fold, supporting his party leader on most issues but refusing to endorse the President's program of political and economic reform without question.

During his two terms in the House, from 1933 to 1936, Gillette established himself as an independent Democrat with moderate views, a stance Roosevelt found increasingly at odds with his own desire to keep a tight rein on the Democratic Congress. Gillette's election to the Senate in a special election in 1936 therefore increased not only the Iowan's visibility in national politics but also the apparent vulnerability of the New Deal legislative coalition that had been forged during Roosevelt's first term of office. With the Iowa primary elections just a few months ahead, Roosevelt concluded that he had to find a replacement for the recalcitrant legislator from Iowa.

Guy M. Gillette had been born near Cherokee in 1879. He attended Drake University Law School, was admitted to the Iowa bar in 1900, and returned to his hometown in northwestern Iowa to practice law.





He served there as city attorney and Cherokee County's prosecuting attorney. Gillette was elected to the state senate as a Democrat in 1912, and he held this post until 1916, when he entered military service. When he returned to Iowa after serving in World War I, he found he had been nominated to run for state auditor in the 1918 campaign. Defeated in the election, he decided to give up law and go into dairy farming. Not until 1932, when his friends persuaded him to run for the U.S. House of Representatives from the Ninth District, did he re-enter politics, and this time he won the seat by a 10,000-vote majority.

Following Roosevelt to Washington in 1933, Gillette established himself as a supporter of the New Deal, though not an un-

critical one. He voted for most major New Deal bills, but opposed both the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Gillette was re-elected in 1934 by a 26,000-vote margin. In 1936, he was re-nominated for a third term, but decided to abandon his House seat to run for the Senate when the death of Democratic Senator Louis B. Murphy opened up a two-year term. He was elected, thus arriving in the Senate at the same time as former Iowa governor Clyde Herring, who had won a full six-year term in the same election.

Gillette had no sooner taken his oath of office in the Senate than he plunged into a controversy over the Supreme Court. Roosevelt, stunned by New Deal setbacks at the hands of the court during his first term, announced on February 5, 1937 that he hoped to nominate for the Supreme Court justices who were sympathetic to his ideals of government. He proposed that a new justice be added for every member who was seventy years old or older and who had had more than ten months' experience on the court, up to a maximum of six additional judges.

Gillette wasted little time in disclosing his opposition to the plan. Three days after the White House announcement he stated that he would fight the bill, calling it inopportune, untimely, and "an attempt to afford political control of the Supreme Court."

The high court itself soon lessened Roosevelt's need for the plan by ruling in favor of the New Deal's National Labor Relations Act in April and the Social Security Act in May. Also, Roosevelt was able to appoint New Deal Senator Hugo Black of Alabama to the court, thus strengthening its liberal complexion. His legislation to enlarge the court, however, did not pass, and the "victory" the President won over the court left a bitter taste in his mouth, especially when he recalled the initial Senate opposition to the measure.



Roosevelt's impatience with Congress was heightened when he found that many legislators were also reluctant to approve other measures in the steady stream of New Deal legislation. The 75th Congress, elected in 1936, was overwhelmingly Democratic and seemed a ready and willing partner to pass further progressive legislation. With unemployment nearing the five-million mark by the summer of 1937, FDR called a special session to convene in November and presented a five-point plan calling for crop control, wages and hours legislation, executive reorganization, regional planning, and revision of the antitrust laws. But Congress, despite its seemingly liberal outlook, balked at the President's plan. Cries of "dictatorship" came from the lawmakers and the media and, despite his 1936 mandate, Roosevelt found himself on the defensive. He was especially angered by the resistance from members of his own party, including Gillette of Iowa.

Gillette, following his opposition to the Supreme Court bill, joined the Democrats who voted against the administration's wages and hours bill. Then, early in 1938, he spoke out against the farm bill, claiming that it gave too much power to the secretary of agriculture, and joined with Southern Democrats and Republicans to block an anti-lynching bill. Gillette also opposed an increase from \$250 million to \$400 million in emergency appropriations to counter the 1938 recession, and he came out against an amendment to the Social Security Act granting the federal government greater authority over state officials operating under state unemployment compensation laws.

Gillette's voting reflected more than a disagreement with the administration over individual pieces of legislation. Gillette's philosophy of government differed from that of the New Deal. While the New Deal pursued a policy of vastly increased government

spending to meet the problems created by the Depression, Gillette said in 1938 that *there must be a curtailment of the tremendous government expenditures not absolutely essential to meet the demands for relief. . . . the gain from engaging in further pump priming would not be proportionate to the heavy further burden of indebtedness and obligations it would invoke.*

On another occasion, he said that he favored "the largest measure of state and local control as in keeping with provisions of the act to be administered." If Roosevelt wanted to expand federal power to deal with the nation's economic troubles, he could not count on the support of the Iowa senator.

The first stirrings of what would become direct action against Gillette and other dissident Democrats began in 1938 soon after the third session of the 75th Congress. Meeting at the home of WPA head Harry Hopkins, a group of New Dealers discussed the possibility of ridding the party of "reactionaries" and creating a genuine liberal-conservative alignment. Nicknamed the "execution committee," the group included Hopkins, Secretary of the Interior Harold P. Ickes, Justice Department official Robert Jackson, WPA administrator David K. Niles, presidential secretary James Roosevelt, and presidential assistants Thomas Corcoran and Benjamin Cohen. The committee believed that the survival of the New Deal depended upon actions that would commit the Democratic party to it, and they concluded that the place to begin the process was in the Democratic primaries and congressional races of 1938.

The idea was to defeat Senate opponents of the court-packing bill who were seeking renomination in the Democratic primaries, and Gillette of Iowa was one of the senators



marked for defeat. The others were Frederick Van Nuys of Indiana, Walter F. George of Georgia, Millard E. Tydings of Maryland, and "Cotton Ed" Smith of South Carolina. The long-range goal was a realigned party system, with liberals in one party and conservatives in the other. After all, so Roosevelt believed, he had pulled much of the 75th Congress to victory on his coattails, only to discover that many of those elected were opposed to further New Deal reforms.

Roosevelt himself repeatedly denied to the press and public that he knew of the execution committee's plans. He did not, however, place any restraints on the committee members during the months that followed. Roosevelt never publicly reprimanded any of the group for their actions or for what they were attempting to do. His part in the purge attempts began quietly and cautiously, and with no definite plan of action.

As the attention of the execution committee turned to Gillette and Iowa, it found that the Democratic party in the Hawkeye State was facing a critical year. In the election of 1932, FDR had carried the state by a 183,536-vote plurality over Iowa native Herbert Hoover. The voters' dissatisfaction with the GOP stemmed from the devastating effect of the Depression on farm prices and the inability of the Republicans to deal with the economic crisis. Iowa voters sent Democrats Clyde Herring to the Statehouse and Louis Murphy to the Senate. Six of the nine congressional seats were won by Democrats, an amazing fact in light of the state's long Republican tradition. In 1934, Herring was re-elected and Democrats captured fifty-nine seats in the Iowa House (compared to forty-nine for the Republicans) and retained six of the nine U.S. House seats.

But Iowa's defection to the Democratic party was beginning to come to an end in 1936. FDR carried Iowa for a second time, but Democratic Lieutenant Governor Nelson

W. Kraschel ran nearly 100,000 votes behind the President in his successful bid for the governor's chair. Republicans gained a congressional seat and captured twenty of the thirty-two state senate seats. The parties were evenly divided in the Iowa House. Though the two U.S. Senate seats were won by Democrats Herring and Gillette, farm prices started to recover and the Republicans were confident that they would soon return to power.

Despite signs of a Republican resurgence, the execution committee found that several political liberals were thinking of challenging Gillette. The best-known of these was Governor Kraschel, who was considered by liberals to be a New Dealer without reservation. He had especially strong support in the eastern counties along the Mississippi River, where the bulk of Iowa's Democratic vote was found. Kraschel pondered whether to run against Gillette in late 1937 and early 1938, evaluating the support he might receive from the administration and from Iowa Democrats. The governor made his decision in January 1938, after he and his wife had travelled to Washington as overnight guests of Roosevelt in the White House. Kraschel conferred with the President and with Iowa's congressional delegation on his possible Senate candidacy, and after returning to Des Moines he ended speculation by announcing on February 1 that he would seek a second term as governor.

Kraschel's decision to stay out of the Senate race stemmed partly from his belief that a squabble between two major Democratic officeholders would split the party and deliver the Senate seat into Republican hands. Also, Senator Herring had earlier said that he would be neutral in the coming primary, thus robbing Kraschel of possible aid from the state's third major political figure.



Kraschel also knew that the gubernatorial nomination was his for the asking, that he could play it safe rather than undertake a risky campaign for the Senate. Finally, and perhaps most important, he had come to believe that Gillette could not be denied renomination.

Other possible liberal challenges to Gillette mentioned in the Iowa press were Roswell Garst of Coon Rapids (an avid New Dealer who had drafted the corn-hog adjustment program); former Iowa Supreme Court Justice Leon Powers; and such lesser figures as State Treasurer Leo J. Wegman, Insurance Commissioner J. Ray Murphy, and Lieutenant Governor John K. Valentine. None of them, as it turned out, entered the Senate race. Nor did Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, an Iowa native, allow his name to be considered.

The first real challenge to Gillette was also the first woman to run for the Senate from Iowa, Mrs. Elizabeth Richardson of Eddyville. In her announcement on January 20, 1938, she declared that she would run as a supporter of the New Deal programs. Subsequently, on March 1, W. G. Byerhoff of Fort Dodge, the 1936 Democratic state committee campaign speaker, began his candidacy, and three days later Carroll attorney J. J. Myers followed suit.

The most important liberal to run against Gillette emerged on February 28, when Seventh District Congressman Otha Wearin of Hastings declared that he was a candidate for Gillette's Senate seat. With his announcement, Wearin made it clear that he considered himself the sole Iowa New Deal candidate.

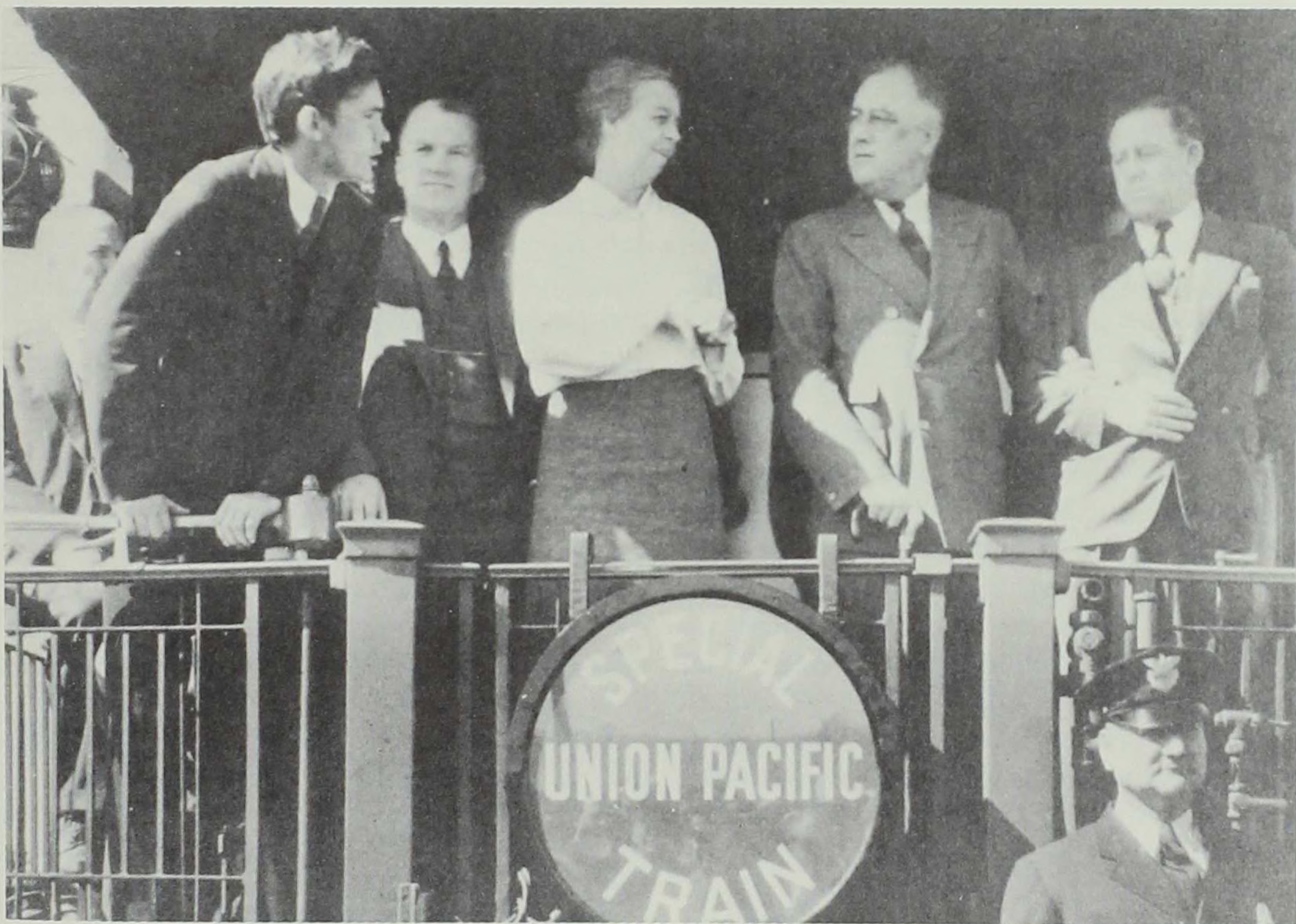
Born near Hastings in 1903, Wearin had graduated from Grinnell College and had spent a year in Rome studying agriculture. He subsequently wrote a book on his travels, and following his return to Hastings, he worked on his father's farm and became active in the local Farm Bureau. In 1927 he

was elected president of the county Farm Bureau, and a year later he was elected to the Iowa House, becoming the chamber's youngest member. Re-elected in 1930, Wearin was the Democratic candidate for speaker in the Republican-dominated House. Two years later he ran for Congress, finishing third in the Democratic primary, but winning the nomination at a district convention called because no candidate had received the necessary 35 percent plurality. As the Democratic nominee, he was swept to Washington in the Roosevelt landslide.

**L**ike Gillette, Wearin voted against the AAA and the NIRA. But on other issues he quickly became known as a staunch New Dealer, and following his re-election in 1934 he joined Maury Maverick's weekly discussion group of avid Roosevelt backers. In 1936 he acquired a seat on the House Ways and Means Committee, where he worked to promote the New Deal's undistributed profits tax.

During the Supreme Court fight, Wearin collected information and passed it along to James Roosevelt, the President's son. In one meeting he told the younger Roosevelt that he was considering challenging Gillette in the 1938 Iowa primary. After Kraschel announced his decision to stay out of the race, Wearin also hinted to the press that he was thinking of running. Before making his final decision, however, he received a call from the White House and was invited to a private meeting with the President. According to Wearin, several of his friends had consulted with Roosevelt and had suggested that he speak with the Iowa congressman "about the dangerous proportion a primary fight might attain in Iowa." In the half-hour conversation with the President, Wearin received no indication that Roosevelt would publicly endorse his candidacy. Roosevelt merely said that he had no inclination to see the congressman





*Congressman Otha Wearin (far left) with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt on the campaign trail, 1936 (SHSI)*

retire from public life, hinting that Wearin could find a job with the administration if his candidacy failed. If FDR wanted Wearin to be the New Deal candidate in Iowa, he kept that information to himself.

Later that day, in the privacy of his office and without consultation with his friends, the thirty-five-year-old congressman decided to run for the senate. The reasons he cited in his autobiography were more personal than political. His father had recently died, leaving Wearin with the responsibility of operating the Hastings farm. And, as he saw it, the six-year Senate term would offer him more security and a better opportunity to supervise his personal affairs and settle his family in one place for a longer period of time. His

belief in the New Deal undoubtedly played a role in the decision, but this seemed to take a back seat to personal considerations, especially in light of the absence of authentic administration support.

Still, Wearin's announcement some two weeks later was worded to link him with the Roosevelt administration. The first two paragraphs of the press release read:

*After a series of conferences at the White House and with administration leaders, Congressman Otha Wearin, Iowa farmer, announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate today.*

*Wearin, an active member of the House liberal group, has been a militant supporter of President Roosevelt's legis-*



lative program.

He had purposely included the hint of White House support, he later wrote, as a means of "kindling the fire" and "leaving the door open" for later administration aid. Whether it would materialize, he had no way of knowing. He knew only that the administration wanted Gillette defeated, and he therefore offered himself as the New Deal candidate.

The declaration took Washington by surprise. White House press secretary Stephen Early issued a "no comment" on the candidacy and said that Wearin had not visited the White House in two weeks. In a press conference, Roosevelt himself repeated his pledge that his administration would not meddle in state primaries. Gillette, who had already announced his re-election plans, rushed to the White House and met with Roosevelt. After the meeting, the Senator told reporters he had been assured that the administration would be neutral.

Meanwhile, Wearin's hint of administration approval for his candidacy seemed to be taking effect in some circles. Richard Wilson of the *Des Moines Register* wrote: "The implication of the Wearin statement was that he bears administration approval." Similarly, the *Burlington Hawk-eye Gazette* suggested that Wearin could hardly have linked his candidacy with Roosevelt "without an understanding."

Much of the Iowa reaction to Wearin's candidacy, however, was hostile. The *Davenport Democrat* declared that it could see no valid reason why Wearin should oppose Senator Gillette, and the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* termed Wearin a "presidential puppet," exercising "no independent judgment." K. E. Birmingham, chairman of the state Democratic party, said he had not been consulted before Wearin's announcement and suggested that the state party did not approve. At a party conference in Cherokee, he

was quoted as saying that "Senator Gillette's opponents do not stand a ghost of a chance of defeating him in the primary."

Despite the opposition in Iowa, the execution committee went ahead with plans to link Wearin with the administration. In early May, James Roosevelt and West Virginia Senator Jennings Randolph accompanied Wearin to a Young Democrats rally at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The trip was accompanied by all the trappings of a political endorsement, including a limousine and a police escort. Wearin's supporters distributed pictures of the rally to Iowa newspapers, leaving the impression that he had strong New Deal support. Launching his campaign in Dubuque on May 16, Wearin declared: "Democrats in Iowa who believe

#### Note on Sources

Much of the information in this article came from newspaper coverage of Iowa politics between January and June 1938. The newspapers are the *Des Moines Register*, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, the *Fort Dodge Messenger and Chronicle*, the *Davenport Democrat*, the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, and the *Burlington Hawk-eye Gazette*. Turner Cartledge's reporting in the *New York Times* also pointed to the political activities in Iowa by President Roosevelt and his associates. Otha Wearin's story of the 1938 primary is found in his autobiography, *Country Roads to Washington* (Des Moines, 1976). Also important was an interview with Henry Wallace, "The reminiscences of Henry Wallace," made by the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University. A transcript of the interview may be found in the Special Collections of the University of Iowa Library. Governor Nelson Kraschel's activities in the 1938 primary are described in the Nelson Kraschel Papers, Special Collections, University of Iowa Library.

Other books used in the preparation of this article are Bernard Donahoe, *Private Plans and Public Dangers* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965); James Farley, *Jim Farley's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House/McGraw-Hill, 1948); Russell Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1947); James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, for the Organization of American Historians, 1967); and Edward L. and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Henry Wallace of Iowa: The Agrarian Years, 1910-1940* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968).

The author would like to thank Dr. Ellis Hawley, Professor of History, University of Iowa, for his assistance in writing this article.



in President Roosevelt cannot consistently support the present senator." The question, he said, was whether Iowa would "go down the line with the New Deal" or "register disapproval of it and Roosevelt." At the same time, the administration withdrew its support for a new bridge at Dubuque — one of Gillette's pet projects — fearing that it would aid the senator in eastern Iowa.

Gillette, in the meantime, seemed to be concerned by Wearin's criticisms. Shortly after Wearin's announcement of his candidacy, Gillette voted in favor of the administration's controversial executive reorganization plan, despite his earlier opposition to the measure. On the same day that Wearin began his campaign in Dubuque, Gillette sent thousands of letters to Iowans reminding them of New Deal bills he had supported, including the rural electrification program, flood control, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the feed and seed loan program, and the 1938 farm bill.

On May 24 the execution committee, in a statement by Harry Hopkins, made its first direct comment on the Iowa primary. *Register* reporter Wilson asked Hopkins, a native of Grinnell, his opinion of the Gillette-Wearin contest. Wilson was initially rebuffed, but he was later called back to Hopkins' office after the WPA director had conferred with Corcoran at the White House. Upon Wilson's return, Hopkins issued a statement reading, "If I voted in the Iowa primary, I would vote for Otha Wearin on the basis of his record."

The Hopkins statement was the top story in the next morning's *Register*, and it triggered an immediate response in both Washington and Iowa. On the Senate floor, Gillette condemned Hopkins for interfering with Iowa politics and insisted that Roosevelt himself was neutral. He said that the

statement was "definitely unfair and unjust to the President, as carrying the imputation that he is not sincere in his statements of neutrality, but is practicing deception by countenancing interference in devious and dubious ways by others." In Iowa, Governor Kraschel dashed off a telegram to Roosevelt and presidential advisor James A. Farley, urging that they take a stand on the matter and damning Hopkins for his assault on "the freedom and independence of the primary voters." Reflecting the opinion of other Iowa newspapers, the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* accused Hopkins of using WPA funds as "a political whip with which to make national affairs run according to the private wishes of the public politicians."

Wearin, of course, made the most of the Hopkins statement, claiming that it proved that the administration supported his campaign. Wearin's backers also went to work. First District Congressman Edward Eicher declared that "the surest way to support the President" was to vote for Otha Wearin, and in making the declaration he implied that he was doing so with Roosevelt's approval. Similarly, Iowa State Treasurer Wegman sent a telegram urging Hopkins to "stand by your guns."

The Hopkins endorsement polarized the Iowa Democratic party and forced Gillette and his supporters to take the matter more seriously. Returning to Iowa two days ahead of schedule, Gillette defended his independent Senate record as one in which he had voted according to his best judgment and blasted Wearin as a "rubber stamp." After meeting in Des Moines with party officials from around the state, Gillette addressed a Davenport radio audience, drawing a parallel between European dictators and New Deal officials attempting to influence the Iowa primary.

By this time, Iowa Democrats had begun



committing themselves to one of the two major candidates. La Mar Foster of West Branch, the speaker of the Iowa House, endorsed Wearin by saying that the congressman's defeat would be "heralded as a defeat for the New Deal." Other Wearin endorsements came from Congressman Eicher, State Treasurer Wegman, U.S. District Attorney E. G. Dunn, former Iowa Senator Dan Steck, and Iowa United Auto Workers President Homer Martin.

But the Wearin campaign could not match the powerful forces lining up behind the Gillette candidacy. Iowa congressmen Fred Biermann and Vincent Harrington publicly supported Gillette, the latter having returned to Iowa to deliver a series of radio addresses on Gillette's behalf. With the exception of Wegman, all elected state officials — including Governor Kraschel — committed themselves to Gillette. Though he publicly

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*"This gang of political termites . . . boring from within . . . [is] planning on taking control of the Democratic party organization. . . ."*

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claimed to be neutral, Kraschel sent letters to influential Iowa Democrats listing sixteen New Deal bills opposed by Wearin, strongly suggesting that Gillette's support for the New Deal was greater than Wearin's. In his letters, Kraschel warned that Democrats should be aware of the contradiction between Wearin's rhetoric and his record and that they should select their candidates "without reference to anything but their record and merit."

In addition, Gillette was now receiving covert assistance from Secretary of Agriculture Wallace. The Iowa-born cabinet member was seriously thinking of running for the

presidency in 1940, and he feared that a split in the Democratic ranks would hurt his chances of capturing the Iowa delegation. Wallace also opposed the concept of a purge, especially one directed against Gillette, whom he respected and considered a valuable ally in securing farm legislation.

The secretary contacted Senator Herring, and the two men then proceeded to suggest a "peace pact" between Wearin and Gillette, in which the loser would pledge to back the winner in the fall campaign. On June 2, Herring called Wearin, and in urging the agreement he indicated that the idea had originated with Roosevelt and that he had initiated it to preserve party unity. Wearin, however, refused to sign the peace pact. Instead, he contacted Congressman Eicher, who met with the President and issued a press statement publicizing the move, saying that Roosevelt had assured him that "he had requested no such statement" and that any "claim he had done so was entirely without foundation or authority."

The reason for the suggested peace pact was obvious: Herring, like Kraschel, had abandoned his neutrality pledge. Knowing that much of Wearin's support came from those who believed that Roosevelt was behind the congressman, the governor and Wallace wanted to nullify this perception by hinting that the President was neutral. Wearin's reaction, however, foiled this effort.

**I**n the final days of the campaign, Gillette crisscrossed the state, portraying himself as an independent legislator standing alone against the organized forces of outsiders from Washington. Never attacking Roosevelt directly, he assaulted Corcoran, Hopkins, and other administration officials by colorfully describing them as

*this gang of political termites who are even now engaged in boring from with-*



*in, in destroying the edifice that the voters of the nation have erected on a democratic foundation and even now are planning on taking over, if possible, the control of the Democratic party organization in 1940.*

He also continued to challenge Wearin's claim that the congressman was the New Deal candidate by citing both candidates' records and pointing to his opponent's votes against administration measures.

A final round of endorsements, coming just days before the primary, further heightened the drama. On June 1, Kraschel met with Gillette, and in a radio address broadcast two days later by five Iowa radio stations, he publicly endorsed him. In strong language he charged that "Otha and his gang are deliberately sponsoring a policy that would prostitute the basic principles of American government." As he had done in his private letters, he stressed the assurances of neutrality he had received from Roosevelt and explained to his listeners that he was taking a stand because of the administration's attempts to influence the primary. Another key endorsement came the next day, when Senator Herring announced from Washington that he had voted for Gillette on his absentee ballot. This marked the first time he had publicly stated a preference.

On the same day as Kraschel's radio address, District Attorney Dunn released a letter from James Roosevelt expressing his support for "my friend Otha Wearin." Earlier, questions had been raised about the strength of administration support for Wearin after the President's son failed to come to Iowa while visiting the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. But the younger Roosevelt now denied that support from Washington was less than 100 percent. Only ill health, he said, had prevented him from coming to Iowa to campaign for Wearin.

## To the Voters of Johnson County

# SEN. GUY M. GILLETTE

## DESERVES RE-NOMINATION

### ON HIS RECORD



30 years of distinguished state and national public service.

A splendid military record in Spanish-American and World Wars.

A consistent supporter of the federal administration in economic and social reforms.

This compares favorably with a rubber stamp.

The voters of Iowa should nominate their candidates free from outside political influence.

Tell Mr. Harry Hopkins that we are not interested in how he would vote in Iowa.

*Do your duty at the polls and help to re-nominate*

## SENATOR GILLETTE

*A handbill circulated by supporters of Senator Guy M. Gillette during the primary campaign of 1938 (SHSI)*

**T**he Iowa Democratic turnout in the June 1938 primary was some 15,000 votes greater than in the primary of 1936, making it the largest Iowa Democratic primary vote in history. Voters gave Gillette a nearly two-to-one victory over Wearin, 81,605 votes to 43,044. The incumbent senator was renominated with more votes than all four of his opponents combined. Wearin's only source of support came from his own Seventh District, where he carried all thirteen counties. Gillette carried the rest of the state. His most impressive victories came in Dubuque County — where he received 8,724 of 11,782 votes cast — and in Woodbury County, where Wearin re-



ceived only 816 votes to Gillette's 4,288.

Gillette eventually won the November election over his Republican opponent, L. J. Dickinson, in a close contest. He served in the Senate until his defeat in 1944 and was re-elected to a single term in 1948. Wearin returned to his Hastings farm and later ran a second unsuccessful race for the Senate, as well as a campaign for governor.

The final result of the 1938 purge attempt against Guy Gillette was not so much a defeat for the New Deal as it was a defeat for New Deal election tactics, which, as it turned out, were based on several errors in judging the Iowa situation. The New Dealers erred, first of all, in attempting to use a young Iowa congressman to unseat an established statewide figure. Gillette had long experience in Iowa politics and was able to make use of his contacts in the final days of the campaign.

Second, administration officials gave their support to a candidate with dubious New Deal credentials. Wearin was not the solid New Deal backer he claimed to be, and Gillette had supported most New Deal measures, the major exceptions being the court-packing bill and wages and hours legislation. Gillette and his supporters were able to exploit these facts.

Third, the New Dealers' support for Wearin came in the form of what appeared to be edicts from such figures as Harry Hopkins and James Roosevelt. Such endorsements were portrayed in Gillette's camp as federal interference in a state election and they had the effect of tying Wearin to those who were attempting to tell Iowans how to vote.

Fourth, the New Dealers were attempting to oust a senator who had the support of most of the key Iowa political figures, including Governor Kraschel, Senator Herring, and Secretary of Agriculture Wallace. Following Hopkins' endorsement of Wearin, these leaders threw their full support to the Gillette campaign, and against this kind of political establishment Wearin had little chance of success.

Fifth, there were signs that Iowa voters were adopting a more conservative voting pattern. As mentioned earlier, the Republican party was regaining its former strength in the state. In the fall, Kraschel lost to his Republican opponent and this, together with Gillette's slim victory, showed a declining enthusiasm for liberal candidates. This trend continued in 1940, when Wendell Willkie carried Iowa in his presidential campaign against Roosevelt.

Finally, it was a mistake for Roosevelt to remain shrouded in mystery, refusing to indicate even to Wearin that he favored his candidacy. The President's silence hurt Wearin and confused New Deal Democrats in Iowa, for without official endorsement from the White House, Wearin could not prove that he was, indeed, the New Deal candidate. Roosevelt learned from his error and took full and public control of the purge battle in his fireside chat later in June. Iowa voters had shown their president the wisdom of frank and forthright leadership. It was a lesson he would not soon forget. □