

The Large View: International and National

THE FAMILY, especially the children, who had talked of little else during the last month of the session, were delighted to return to Nebraska. Home in McCook, Norris sought to keep his political fences in repair. In Washington he had secured from lameduck Senator Dietrich some of the free government documents available in his office. Now he distributed them among his constituents.¹

Thoroughly familiar with numerous departmental procedures, he was able to inform his constituents of the various rules and regulations necessary to obtain, for example, a rural free delivery route or a pension.² He had made sure that the Department of Agriculture knew that he represented a district where alfalfa, wheat, and corn were the principal crops and that, as a usual thing, the area did not receive as much moisture as the eastern part of Nebraska. Norris hoped the department would find it possible to conduct experiments with these crops "with a view to the introduction of varieties particularly adapted to the conditions there, which would result in a great benefit to the farmers of the district." He also had urged that seed corn, wheat, and alfalfa be sent to leading farmers for experimental purposes and that the semi-arid districts not be forgotten by government research scientists.³

In the Fifty-ninth Congress he had spoken in favor of an amendment providing funds for dry farming, which would make productive "a very large scope of country" that heretofore had been considered useless for agricultural purposes. In these remarks, he showed an intimate knowledge of agricultural techniques, explaining to his colleagues the "Campbell system," a method of dry farming that had been experimented with in his district.⁴ Thus at the outset of his congressional career, Norris expressed an interest in improving agricultural production in the short-grass country. He knew that the soil, which basically was very rich, needed more moisture. He was intent upon

filling this need by increasing the farmer's knowledge of dry farming and other techniques, by putting sturdier seeds in his hands, and later by providing vast irrigation facilities that would make farmers better able to cope with the vicissitudes of nature.

In Washington Norris had supported a bill introduced by a Nebraska colleague, Moses P. Kinkaid, which, when signed into law by President Roosevelt on April 28, 1904, affected the pattern of public land distribution, particularly in Nebraska. In conjunction with the Reclamation Act of 1902 it marked a major and more realistic change in the land policy of the United States. Briefly, the law permitted anyone to acquire a homestead of 640 acres if he had lived there for five years and made at least \$800 worth of improvements. Its effect was a remarkable increase of homesteading in western Nebraska, where small-scale ranching now became possible.⁵

Traveling through this area shortly after his return from Washington, Norris found that the great majority of claims had been filed by men who intended to make their permanent homes there. The settlement of this vacant land, he thought, would help remove many illegal fences that had been placed on the public domain by unscrupulous cattlemen. In conversation with a county assessor, Norris learned that in five precincts the population had increased by ninety families and that this fact was quickly registered in the rising value of taxable personal property. Such evidence helped convince him that the law was a beneficial one.⁶

However, because of the numerous violations by cattlemen in the sparsely populated sand-hills region, Norris soon modified his views. He came to favor a plan whereby the state would assume ownership of these lands and then either sell or lease them to the cattlemen. Since most of the land available under the Kinkaid Act was located in Nebraska, he believed that the state could deal with violations better than the national government, which did not have enough agents on hand to see that cattlemen did not unlawfully extend their fences and intimidate would-be settlers. Moreover, the funds derived from selling or leasing land could be used to improve the state school system.⁷

Though affairs in the district kept him busy during May and June, it was the forthcoming trip to Europe, as a delegate to the Interparliamentary Union, that excited him. To be a delegate to this conference, an individual had to be a member of the highest legislative body of his government. The union's object was to encourage a sentiment which would ultimately result in the abandonment of warfare between nations, and it had in mind, among other such calamities, the Russo-Japanese War then in progress. The organization had no official con-

nection with any government and its work was of an advisory nature, though the calibre of its membership gave it a quasi-official status. The leader of the American delegation, Congressman Bartholdt of Missouri, had been responsible for the Interparliamentary Union meeting in St. Louis in 1904 and for Roosevelt's invitation to its members to visit the White House, where he had promised to support a second peace conference at The Hague. While Norris did not attend the 1904 meeting and had refused Bartholdt's initial request that he be a delegate to the 1905 conference, he eventually decided to attend the Brussels meeting of the union.⁸

After enjoying a brief vacation with his family in Wisconsin, Norris left New York on August 12 on the Red Star Line steamer, *Vaderland*. The vessel docked at Antwerp, and Norris arrived in Brussels about a week prior to the opening session.⁹

At the thirteenth meeting of the Interparliamentary Union the American delegation made two significant suggestions. It called for the preparation of a model arbitration treaty and recommended that steps be taken toward the establishment of an international organization with jurisdiction to enact into law such statutes as might be necessary to insure peace among nations. After much debate and discussion it was decided to refer these matters to the next meeting of the Hague Conference. Norris, as well as most of the other members of the American delegation, spoke in favor of these resolutions.¹⁰

At the close of the conference, the Belgian representatives invited all the delegates to a reception in the building where Napoleon's officers had assembled on the eve of Waterloo. The rooms were decorated with the colors of all nations. At the very same time the peace commissioners at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, were concluding the details of the treaty ending the Russo-Japanese War. As Norris later recalled:

The finest band in Belgium was playing her national air. In the midst of it the music suddenly ceased. All eyes were turned to the rostrum. We saw the leader of the band seize from the decorations of the hall the American flag, and using it as a baton, he waved it over the heads of the musicians, and in answer to his action, there burst forth the rapturous strains of the Star-Spangled Banner. For a moment, and a moment only, there was silence, and then there burst forth a roar of applause which clearly indicated that everyone there understood that beneath the fathomless deep the electric spark had brought the welcome news that on the shores of America an agreement for peace had been signed. On the occasion of

nearly one hundred years before the revelry was interrupted by the booming of cannon, but on this occasion it was the joyous message that under the leadership of America the peace of the world had been established. That was an occasion . . . when it was greater to be an American citizen than to wear a crown.¹¹

Norris recalled this incident and his brief trip to Germany many times during his career. Back home in McCook, after an enlightening and enjoyable European trip, Norris learned that application had been made in favor of President Roosevelt as the American candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize because of his efforts in concluding the Russo-Japanese War. Norris had mistakenly believed that the prize could not be awarded to a head of state, and would have preferred and strongly supported Congressman Bartholdt as the American candidate because of his work as head of the American delegation to various meetings of the Interparliamentary Union.¹²

Before returning to Washington, he acceded to several requests to talk about his recent trip. A friend, who attended the lecture in the Clay Center Opera House, noted that people sat still and were attentive throughout. Norris had no prepared speech, but spoke, as he always spoke in Congress or during a campaign, extemporaneously. Moreover, he insisted that, since he did not expect any pay, no admission should be charged.¹³

Though not actively participating in the 1905 state-wide campaign, Norris nevertheless urged Republican leaders to turn out the vote on election day.¹⁴ As expected, Republican candidates won most of the available offices and Norris turned his attention to the convening of the Fifty-ninth Congress early in December. Though Speaker Cannon refused to commit himself about committee assignments, he told Norris to rest assured that the matter would receive "consideration from one who has the most friendly feeling toward yourself both from the personal and political standpoint."¹⁵

Norris agreed to some extent with the criticism of the rules of the House of Representatives then being voiced, but felt that the fault lay in the large and unwieldy size of the body and not, as he was later to believe, in the power of the Speaker. Limitations on debate were necessary if any work was to be accomplished. Discussion and legislation, he knew, were controlled to a great extent by the older members who enjoyed great influence in House affairs. Realizing that he would enjoy no influential role in this Congress, Norris wanted to remain on a committee where he could be instrumental in having federal funds allocated for his district. Realistic in his appraisal of the House of

Representatives and of his negligible role in its functioning, Norris, as the Fifty-ninth Congress prepared to convene, was unaware of any tyranny or undue power exercised by Speaker Cannon.¹⁶

Departing for Washington ahead of his family, Norris found a pleasant apartment on Mintwood Place near Rock Creek Park. In a neighboring apartment lived a freshman congressman from North Dakota, Asle J. Gronna, and the two families soon became very friendly.¹⁷ Mrs. Norris was pregnant and the family looked forward to a new addition some time in February or March.

On February 23, 1906, very early in the morning, Mrs. Norris gave birth to twin boys, both of them dying within twenty-four hours. For a while she hovered between life and death, remaining on the critical list at Providence Hospital for several days. Her husband, unwilling to let her return to Nebraska with the bodies of the dead infants for burial, reluctantly decided to have them cremated. This experience was a painful ordeal for the entire family. It deeply affected Norris, who rarely mentioned it either in conversation or in correspondence.¹⁸

On Capitol Hill Norris found, when Congress convened, that Cannon had rewarded him with a place on the Committee on Labor in addition to membership on the two committees on which he had previously served. Despite his trip to Europe, he showed little interest in foreign affairs. The Alaskan boundary dispute, the Russo-Japanese War, the Panama Canal, and other aspects of American expansion were not topics of discussion in his letters or public addresses. Domestic and largely local issues occupied his attention. However, during this session his horizon continued to expand. He received a petition from the leading citizens of McCook protesting pogroms in the Russian Empire, and both he and his secretary signed it and sent it on to the president. He was also in sympathy with the idea of sending Chinese students to the United States.¹⁹ But his primary interest in world affairs focused on the Philippine tariff measure, supported by the administration and providing for free trade with this newly acquired dependency.

On January 13, 1906, Norris delivered his longest speech of the session reviewing the Philippine question and proclaiming his opposition to the bill. He pointed with pride to the American achievement of bringing material improvements, educational facilities, and a court system to the islands. He noted that according to the tariff law in operation all revenue collected from Philippine imports was being turned back into their treasury, thereby providing funds necessary to administer this dependency. If the administration bill was passed, the

American people, Norris argued, would then have to provide these funds out of increased taxation.

He came to the core of his opposition when he noted that the beet-sugar men, who, incidentally, had established one of the first beet-sugar factories in the United States in Grand Island, Nebraska, did not favor the measure. Like them, he claimed it would benefit the "sugar trust." Since the bulk of the imports from the Philippine Islands consisted of cane sugar which had to be refined before it could be consumed, Norris noted that there was but one purchaser of raw sugar in the United States, the sugar trust. Free trade thus would further benefit the trust since it could arbitrarily fix the price for raw sugar received by producers in the Philippines. This occurrence would in turn fix the price to the American consumer. Sugar refiners would have a greater opportunity to increase their profits with no corresponding reduction in consumer prices, while the Philippine producers would not receive a better price for their sugar. Speaking of the producer who was supposed to benefit from this bill, Norris said, "We are giving him a gold brick, and while he is innocently picking at the gilt on the outside and discovering the deception on the inside the sugar trust walks away with the swag and the Filipino is holding the sack." He thought a better name for the bill would be, "An act for the purpose of deceiving the Filipino, for menacing an American industry, and for the enrichment of the sugar trust."

The menaced American industry was the beet-sugar industry, the development of which would be retarded by this measure. Since beet-sugar factories would most likely be established either in western Nebraska or eastern Colorado, Norris was concerned about any measure which could retard the future development of his district. He therefore included as part of the peroration of his argument a traditional appeal for protection.²⁰

Opposition to this bill placed Norris in an embarrassing position. His views ran counter to those of the president whom he claimed to support, and his opponents in Nebraska would be sure to notice this contradiction. Furthermore, his opposition may have endangered his standing with Speaker Cannon.

Norris was criticized for his opposition but he was ready with a defense of his position. The tariff measure, he claimed, was unimportant as compared "with the great corporation question." And on this issue he was in full accord with the president. Moreover, Norris was convinced that Roosevelt advocated the measure "simply because it was recommended to him by Secretary Taft." But, Norris assured an irate constituent, his stand did not jeopardize his relations either with

the president or with Speaker Cannon; "You must certainly admit that a member of Congress who would do nothing except follow the views of some other person would be nothing more or less than a cipher."²¹

Despite reassurances, Norris was concerned lest his enemies use this vote as a lever in opposing his renomination. He wrote numerous letters explaining his position and arguing that the subject had been overestimated in its importance to the president. He also was not happy about Washington rumors that he was an "insurgent" and would oppose the president on other aspects of his program.²²

In view of his later career, it is rather ironic that Norris gained his initial reputation as an insurgent for supporting the theory of protection, while being labeled an opponent of the first trust-busting president simply because he opposed further favors to an already powerful corporation. However, criticism leveled against Norris also indicated Roosevelt's great popularity in Nebraska. The people by and large accepted his moral posture of an increased role for the federal government to curb some of the corporate privileges prevalent in American life.

Though Norris defended the theory of protection in his opposition to the Philippine tariff bill, he was not dogmatic and he recognized inequities in the prevailing Dingley Tariff. Sentiment for revision was rising, but he recognized that change for the sake of change could perpetrate greater inequities than already existed: "The very announcement that the tariff is to be revised would immediately have a very depressing influence upon the business of the entire country. Everybody would want to wait and see what the new tariff was going to be before urging any business proposition involving large sums of money." Since revision was an intricate and politically volatile subject, he said it should be undertaken immediately after an election by a special session of Congress and never during an election year when it would become an obvious political "football."

Despite sentiment for tariff modification, Norris believed that Roosevelt was eminently correct in not calling a special session of Congress for this purpose after his overwhelming election in 1904. It should only be attempted, he argued, when no other major item of legislation was to be considered. Since the administration had given priority to the question of the regulation of railroad rates, tariff revision would have to wait. This view, Norris believed, was also Roosevelt's view. No mention of tariff revision appeared in his annual message, nor did he call a special session of Congress.²³

As Norris sagely observed, the president was more interested in railroad regulation than in the tariff. And it was to this former topic

that the first session of the Fifty-ninth Congress devoted much of its attention. Norris was fully in accord with the administration's position of granting power over rates to the Interstate Commerce Commission.

For over thirty years the railroads of Nebraska had been a subject of political controversy. They were in politics, particularly Republican politics, and their influence was again noticeable now that the party had returned to power. However, Democratic and Populist hostility and suspicion, and the desire to curb their power, in the 1890's had engendered a sentiment that carried over into the new century. Many young leaders in the Republican party in Nebraska were talking very much like the Populists and Bryan Democrats a decade earlier in their hostility to railroad influence and boss rule. Such sentiment, prevalent in other states as well, encouraged Roosevelt in his desire to grant effective power to the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate railroads and other common carriers. Norris was swept along by this rising tide in Nebraska; his attitude toward the railroads now became openly critical. The previous hostility of W. S. Morlan, the Burlington's powerful agent in McCook, toward Norris' candidacy in 1902, no doubt, helped in pushing him into the more liberal wing of his party.

Shortly before Norris left for Washington he received a letter indicative of the more critical attitude toward the railroad. The writer, a political leader, said that the stock shippers in his county were complaining of inadequate and detrimental freight service. Stock shipments to Denver, for example, were taking much more time than necessary because the Burlington lines required freight train crews to rest, while it charged the shippers from sixteen to eighteen dollars per car extra freight. The delay caused a shrinkage in the collective weight of the cattle (hence in their value), and added to their risk of injury or death.²⁴ Thus with businessmen, farmers, and cattlemen disturbed by the railroad's shipping policies, it required no great courage for a politician to openly attack the railroad. And many did so less from conviction than from mere opportunism.

In Washington, once the president requested Congress to enact a railroad rate bill, Norris proclaimed himself in "perfect sympathy" with these views. He intended to aid in the enactment of an adequate law that would give some legal body the power to fix a fair rate.²⁵

In explaining his decision to his former political adviser, ex-Senator Manderson, chief of the Law Department of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company, Western Division, Norris wrote:

Ever since the beginning of this rate agitation, I have interested myself in the question. I had read volumes—speeches, argu-

ments, resolutions, etc., on the subject. I have devoted all the time at my disposal to this subject. I know that I have been conscientious and honest in trying to reach a just conclusion—just to the public and the railroads alike.

He claimed that hostility to the Burlington railroad in southwestern Nebraska had become noticeable only after the system had come under the control of James J. Hill in 1901. Until that time the Burlington had come as close to meeting and supplying the wants of its customers and patrons as any railroad in existence, while the people along its lines exhibited friendly feeling toward the road and its managers. Since that time, however, there had been a change for the worse; merchants and customers in the smaller towns had become prejudiced against the road and its policies. Norris illustrated what he meant by noting:

There was a time, not many years ago, when a merchant in one of these towns could order goods from Omaha, Lincoln, Kansas City or St. Joseph, knowing with an absolute certainty within an hour or two of the time when that order of goods would reach him. He could order something he had sold to a customer and be able to guarantee a prompt delivery—at least within a day or two. He could order by wire, knowing when he did so exactly when the goods so ordered would be delivered at his home station. Conditions have radically changed. At the present time it is not an uncommon thing for goods to be ordered and not delivered until from twenty to thirty days, when in the ordinary course of business it should not require more than two to three days to make such delivery, and such was the case in former days.

This lack of desire to accommodate local shippers, it seemed to Norris, had come about by the adoption of what was called "the tonnage rule," an arrangement whereby the number and frequency of trains over a particular line depended on the tonnage shipped. Some freight trains, Norris had learned from railroad men in McCook, required from twenty-five to forty hours going over one division. Such conditions, he explained, had never existed prior to the Hill management. Meanwhile, hostile sentiment, injurious to the railroad, its employees, and its customers, was spreading. Though these examples had no direct connection with rate supervision, in Norris' judgment they had much to do with prevailing sentiment on that question. He was convinced that feeling against the railroad had been brought about by changes introduced by the Hill management. Moreover, these changes explained why numerous Nebraska citizens were against the

railroad and would continue to be so "without going into a very deep consideration of the merits of any particular controversy."²⁶

Early in 1906 Norris returned to Manderson his pass on the Burlington system in Nebraska. Previously in the 1905 campaign all parties had included in their platforms strong statements denouncing, as particularly offensive, the granting of passes. One Nebraska historian has noted that this antipass sentiment "had its effect upon politicians who had hitherto resisted or disregarded it, and some of the principal officials assumed the halo of righteousness by ostentatiously repudiating the now disreputable tag of special privilege."²⁷

Norris was certainly affected by this sentiment, though he assumed no righteous pose. He doubted if he had ever been influenced in his official conduct. "As a matter of fact," he wrote, "my constituents have been the beneficiaries of the free transportation I have had, more than myself, as it has enabled me to give personal attention to matters in distant portions of my congressional district connected with my official duties, matters that I could not have attended to personally had I been compelled to stand the entire expense of the trips." Thus he realized that the loss of a pass would add to his expenditures. By returning his pass, Norris politely severed relations with the Burlington Railroad, some of whose officials, especially Manderson, had advised and helped him in his political career and on whose payroll he had been when he was a struggling young lawyer in Beaver City.²⁸

Not only did Norris support most of the railroad bills presented in this session of Congress, he also introduced one limiting the hours of service by railroad employees. Appearing before the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce he made several statements about freight train schedules, the time consumed in shipments by freight, and the long hours of service of railroad trainmen. After the witness for the Burlington Railroad denied that there were freight delays, Norris wrote several friends requesting further evidence he could use in support of his measure. Most of his examples were derived from conversation with merchants and railroad employees in McCook and elsewhere, but he now desired more specific information, such as detailed way-bills.

Nothing came of this measure because Congress was devoting most of its time to the railroad rate question. But Norris continued to collect the information he desired. Rarely, if ever, in his future congressional career would he introduce and support a bill without first having examined and mastered all the information he could find on it. Measures, such as the one he introduced, Norris believed, at least had the effect

of making the railroads improve their service to prevent further government probing.²⁹

He was also in accord with the administration's request for legislation calling for the careful inspection and supervision of packing houses and food and drug products used in interstate commerce. Bills to achieve these results were considered in June, 1906, and Norris was certain they would pass before the session adjourned. He was not certain, however, how effective they would be. And he was unhappy that reports filed with the president, showing that proper inspection was not taking place, had been given so much prominence. He believed that as a result the packing industry had received a damaging blow and that great harm would result for stock raisers.

Not that Norris was against the investigation and regulation of packing house methods in the interest of public health. But he felt that necessary reforms and improvements could have been made without going into so many horrible details (since the packing business was necessarily a "dirty business") which tended to affect adversely both the domestic and foreign markets for meats. Furthermore, he hoped that in the bill presented to Congress the cost of inspection would be borne by the government and not by the packers, who could take this item out of the price paid for the cattle, thereby affecting the stock raiser, the farmer, and the consumer.³⁰ Certainly Nebraska stockmen, concerned about provisions for the cost of inspection, found Norris' position in accord with their views. Indeed, no position that he took during this significant session was markedly out of line with the views of his constituents.

Norris reintroduced his resolution calling for a constitutional amendment affecting the terms of the president, senators, and representatives. This time the amendment received editorial notice, and a modified version of it (calling for a six-year presidential tenure) was actually discussed by Norris in the closing days of the session. His interest in improving the processes of government was receiving some recognition, primarily because it was in accord with growing public clamor for the direct election of senators.³¹

The tenor of Norris' remarks in this session of Congress, with the exception of the Philippine tariff bill, was in support of administration measures and in favor of the expansion of federal authority in instances where the public interest was threatened. Thus he spoke in support of the right of Congress to regulate life insurance companies: "Those who have charge of insurance moneys are charged with a duty not only to the State, but to all humanity." Since insurance companies, like other powerful corporate interests, were nationwide in their activities,

and since most state legislation had failed to prevent their mismanagement of other people's money, he thought national supervision would be better, both for the insured and for "all honest insurance companies." The companies then would have to comply with only one set of requirements instead of many sets (contradictory state requirements) which by their very nature encouraged unethical practices.³²

Despite his opposition to part of the president's program, he regarded himself during the first session of the Fifty-ninth Congress as an ardent supporter of Theodore Roosevelt. Indeed, during this session he had broken with the dominant corporate interest in Nebraska, the Burlington Railroad, and had championed the curbing or supervision of corporate wealth. The session revealed Norris as a Roosevelt Republican also in his support of the expanding role of government. Though he always favored economy and denounced reckless expenditures, he was willing to use the power of the central government, usually after the states had shown themselves unable to solve a problem, to promote the health and general well-being of the American people. There was no theoretical basis for this belief; his approach was essentially a pragmatic one based upon experience, knowledge, and understanding.

Since most of the opposition to the president's program came from powerful, able, conservative, and standpat titans led by Nelson W. Aldrich and concentrated in the Senate, the House of Representatives has received little attention in most discussions of Roosevelt's policies. The growing tensions between elements in the Republican party were not evident in the lower chamber because Speaker Cannon and the president worked well together. The House of Representatives usually quickly passed bills that the administration favored. Most of the fights over Roosevelt's legislative program occurred in the Senate chamber.

George Norris, a respected younger member of the House of Representatives, was gaining stature through his handling of committee assignments and his lucid and cogent remarks. He was a partisan Republican, but not an emotional or vitriolic one. He looked after the interests of his constituents so well that early in the session he was informed, "Your renomination and re-election is as good as done now."³³ Finally, though his trip to Europe the previous summer had been an enlightening and rewarding experience, his horizon was largely a national one. As Norris returned to Nebraska in 1906 he no doubt mused about the prospect of increased expenditures owing to the necessity of campaigning without the benefit of a railroad pass.