

Preliminaries

PROGRESSIVE REPUBLICANS emerged from the Nebraska primary in a most advantageous position. Nearly all of their candidates had been elected, and their leaders now assumed a more dominant position in the party hierarchy. Much depended upon the outcome of the Republican National Convention in June. If Taft were nominated, F. P. Corrick, who had directed the over-all progressive primary campaign, assured Norris that they would have to "hustle good and plenty to elect anything on the Republican State Ticket." Governor Aldrich would have a difficult campaign no matter who was nominated for the presidency because he had antagonized citizens representing all shades of political opinion through inept moves and hasty decisions. Norris, still busy in Washington with legislative duties, had made no serious blunder during the primary campaign, and was the strongest candidate on the entire Republican ticket, though his plurality was not as large as the governor's.¹

A week after his primary victory Norris, by way of a diversion from politics, spoke at a large meeting in Washington celebrating the anniversary of Odd Fellowship in America. He had been working under strain and pressure and now rheumatism added to his general feeling of misery. He needed a rest, but at the same time he had every intention of plunging into the campaign and working hard to the very end. If Roosevelt were nominated, Norris predicted a relatively easy triumph in Nebraska. But regardless of the nominee, he believed that "the progressive spirit of the age" would require voters to lay aside "the political partisan yoke" and consider measures and men without regard to party politics. Such a condition would mean better legislation, since it would leave officeholders free to vote according to the dictates of their consciences. A free individual, acting in accord with a higher moral law, could only insure greater happiness and progress for a democratic people. Norris believed this end could be achieved in the coming election when voters would have an opportunity to over-

throw political bosses and machine rule, and he was determined to play an active role in this effort.²

Observers in Nebraska felt that Norris' popularity would have to carry the rest of the ticket if Taft were nominated, and that Norris' name would attract Democratic votes as well. But as Roosevelt won more and more primary elections, Norris was inclined to believe that the former president would be nominated and would lead the ticket to victory in Nebraska. Norris reported that every member of the House from Massachusetts, which Taft had barely won, was absent from Washington for a week or ten days before that primary. They were all Taft supporters. One of them told Norris that if the delegation had not returned to campaign, Roosevelt would have carried practically every district in the state.³

With the decisive defeat of Taft in the Ohio primary in mid-May, some politicians and most public opinion began to concede that Roosevelt would win the nomination. After the New Jersey primary, the victorious Roosevelt began to admit that he was "reasonably sure" of becoming his party's standard-bearer. Similar optimism was rampant in Nebraska. On May 22, behind closed doors in Lincoln, the Republican delegates and their alternates to the national convention decided to support Taft and then La Follette only if Roosevelt were unable to obtain the nomination.⁴

In Washington, Norris refused to prepare statements on the issues of the campaign until the platforms were formulated. He did state, however, that in his opinion the most important issue would be an enlargement of the rights of citizens to participate in governmental affairs—the overthrow on the national scene of political machines and boss rule. To achieve this goal he endorsed the widely discussed devices of the initiative, referendum, and recall, the direct election of United States senators, and the direct nomination of presidential candidates. To Norris, the issues of the campaign were projections on the national scene of his experience in the House.⁵

The unwillingness of the Republican machine to yield power became fully evident to Norris and other progressives when they found it impossible to obtain tickets to the national convention. Norris soon concluded that Taft managers intended to steal the nomination by excluding Roosevelt and La Follette supporters from the galleries, by pressuring delegates, and by obtaining control of key convention committees. He believed Taft men would prefer to retain control of the party machinery rather than to win at the polls. He fully expected them to decide arbitrarily against Roosevelt delegates in disputed contests through their control of committees. Concerned as he was

over this situation, Norris could do nothing to prevent it. Since he had chosen not to be a delegate, he did not plan to go to Chicago, intending instead to stay in Washington.⁶

Two days before the convention convened, Norris told a reporter he thought the Republican platform should contain a permanent, non-partisan tariff commission, supplemental antitrust legislation, a workmen's compensation law applying to interstate railroads, the placing of the post office on a business basis, a presidential primary law, new rules determining representation in national conventions on the basis of voting strength and prohibiting federal officials from the control and management of political campaigns, the short ballot, and, finally, the initiative, referendum, and recall. Most of these planks were in accord with the wishes of progressive Republican delegates assembling in Chicago.⁷

On June 17, the Nebraska delegation at its first caucus in Chicago censured Victor Rosewater, acting chairman of the National Committee and a devoted Taft supporter. Rosewater found that the delegates would abide by none of his arrangements. The way they treated him, however, was only a preview of the bitterness and ill will that was to characterize relations between progressive and conservative delegates throughout the convention.⁸

As the convention got under way, Norris anxiously read accounts of the Republican organization's rejection of the claims of the vast majority of the Roosevelt delegates for contested seats. When he learned that Roosevelt men had bolted the Committee on Resolutions and that a movement was under way for a separate convention, he made hurried plans to leave for Chicago. He sent the following nightletter to F. P. Corrick:

Opposed to organization of new party. The progressive are the true Republicans. Fight to purge the roll. If defeated by stolen votes . . . organize and nominate candidate without leaving hall. We already have control of party and candidates in progressive states. We must not give this up. We are the Republicans and entitled to the designation on official ballot.⁹

When Norris arrived in Chicago, Roosevelt already had received assurances of financial support for a new party. The former president had prepared a message which was read by Henry J. Allen of Kansas shortly after the delegates assembled on Saturday, June 22. Roosevelt chronicled the outrageous frauds of the convention and asked delegates not to participate any longer in its deliberations. That afternoon it was announced that a new party would be formed that night at Orchestra

Hall. Hiram Johnson opened the evening meeting with a rousing speech and Roosevelt announced, amid tumultuous roars of approval, that he would accept the nomination of a new party if it were made by a new convention regularly called and honestly elected. Earlier, when Norris was introduced to the audience, another round of cheers went up, and he ascended the platform and probably remained there throughout the remainder of the proceedings.¹⁰

Returning thereafter to Washington, Norris felt that the exciting events in Chicago insured a Democratic victory in Nebraska. While he was confused about the campaign and his own political future, he was certain that under no circumstances could he be induced to support Taft after "the fraudulent, dishonest and illegal methods by which he received his pretended nomination." Norris had no intention of sanctioning what he considered the unseating of honestly elected delegates by men who had not "a scintilla of an honest or rightful claim to the seats." He drafted a statement, soon released to the press and later expanded into a speech delivered on the House floor, which reviewed the situation in detail. "Democratic Tammany," claimed Norris, "in her worst guise had never more arbitrarily and unlawfully trampled the rights of the individual voter under foot than was done by these political manipulators and bosses, most of whom had already been repudiated in their own states and in their own communities by the rank and file of the Republican party."¹¹

To Norris, Roosevelt had been nominated at Orchestra Hall early in the morning of June 23, and a new convention and a third party were unnecessary. Roosevelt had been nominated without opposition in one of the most enthusiastic meetings he had ever attended, and Norris intended to support him as the only lawfully nominated Republican candidate for president.

Full formalities were ignored, Norris explained, because most delegates had been in Chicago for a week and could not remain any longer. The Orchestra Hall delegates, unanimous in their support of Roosevelt, were eager to endorse him and depart as quickly as possible. Thus they passed a resolution, which Norris claimed the newspapers never published, stating that they constituted a majority of the legally elected Republican delegates of the National Republican Convention, and acting on behalf of the Republicans of the nation, had nominated Roosevelt as the Republican candidate for president.¹²

On this basis Norris opposed the creation of a third party, especially in Nebraska where progressives had nominated almost all of the candidates and had complete control of the situation. He feared that if a third party were organized, some progressive candidates might

withdraw from the Republican ticket, giving Taft men control of the party in Nebraska. Norris, who had no desire to leave the Republican party, hoped that if a new party were started it would endorse all of the candidates already nominated in progressive Republican states like Nebraska.¹³

Norris' condemnation of machine tactics in securing Taft's nomination "created something of a sensation" in Nebraska. Upon learning the details of the Chicago convention, Nebraskans were more enthusiastic than ever for Roosevelt and looked forward to progressive Republicans dominating the state convention. The Nebraska delegation to the Chicago convention also issued a series of statements challenging the outrage perpetrated on the people by the fraudulently constituted convention. Like Norris' speech, these releases analyzed the contests in disputed states. All concluded that a majority of lawfully elected delegates were for Roosevelt and that enough votes were stolen from him to give Taft the nomination. Norris endorsed these statements and planned to plunge into the fight to capture control of the forthcoming state convention.¹⁴

Norris had no intention of leaving the party and no desire to conceal and cover the fraud and manipulation that had taken place within it. He thought it his duty to expose it and to repudiate the nominee whose title to the nomination depended upon illegal and fraudulent action. To summarize his feelings in this matter, he used a phrase made memorable by Abraham Lincoln:

I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have. I must stand with anybody who stands right, stand with him while he is right and part from him when he goes wrong.¹⁵

He believed too that Roosevelt had no reason for leaving the party, that he should have accepted without qualification the nomination tendered him, and that he should not attempt to organize a third party. Progressives, Norris contended, should simply recognize the Orchestra Hall meeting and go ahead with the fight. While such a step could no longer be taken on the national level, it could be taken on the state level, and he urged supporters to send progressive delegates to the Republican State Convention in Lincoln to extirpate machine control in Nebraska. He intended to support Roosevelt without joining the new party. If the Taft element in Nebraska claimed he was not a Republican and nominated somebody in his place, Norris admitted his cause would be hopeless. The fate of Norris and of the progressive movement in Nebraska thus depended on which faction

gained control of the convention scheduled to meet on July 30 to adopt a party platform.¹⁶

Norris was displeased about the role of Senator La Follette, who had remained in Washington throughout the national convention. La Follette had refused to let his delegates support Governor Francis E. McGovern of Wisconsin for temporary chairman and, while Norris knew the senator had been treated shabbily, he considered this action a serious mistake.¹⁷ La Follette seemed to prefer the defeat of the progressive cause to victory with Roosevelt as standardbearer. When it became apparent he could not win, La Follette should have given up his individual ambitions for the progressive movement. While he still admired La Follette, Norris nevertheless was critical of his behavior during the primary campaigns and especially during the national convention.¹⁸

Nebraskans soon supported Norris' repudiation of Taft. Letters, resolutions, editorials all announced that voters agreed with or at least admired his straightforward declaration. His statement, released after his return to Washington from the convention, was the first of its kind. Governor Aldrich followed with one of his own. But McCarl warned Norris that since his position was stronger than the governor's, he should not work too closely with Aldrich in the campaign.¹⁹

McCarl realized, however, that control of the state convention was more important than the question of Norris' relationship with Aldrich. If the convention were standpat and favored Taft, it would no doubt condemn Norris, Aldrich, and others who had come out against Taft. On the other hand, if the progressive faction could control the convention, the rest of the campaign would be relatively easy. A platform in accord with Norris' views would be adopted and no third party ticket then would appear on the ballot. To bring about this desired result, McCarl proposed to see "the right fellows in person" to make sure that their counties chose progressive delegates to county conventions, thereby insuring a state convention favorable to the progressive cause.²⁰

Meanwhile Norris prepared a statement stressing the importance of a progressive platform and the election of progressive delegates to the state convention. Such a platform would show that the rank and file of the party in Nebraska were in favor of progressive principles and were opposed to the methods used "to steal the presidential nomination" for Taft.²¹

It had been rumored that Norris might act as temporary or permanent chairman of the state convention and make a speech, but several friends warned him against such action. Any address would

have to endorse other progressive candidates and thus would lose him Democratic and independent votes. While many Democrats might vote for Norris, few would vote for Aldrich or other progressive Republican candidates. Since Norris was the only Republican in the state with a chance of being elected, these friends felt it would be political suicide to aid candidates who had been more or less indifferent to his success in the past. All agreed, however, that the chances that progressives would control the convention were good.²²

So persistent were rumors that the standpatters, if they controlled the convention, would ask Norris to withdraw from the ticket, that he wrote a letter to the chairman of the State Republican Committee, John L. Kennedy. In it he stated that if his course in refusing to recognize Taft as his party's nominee were unsatisfactory to the Republicans who nominated him, he would withdraw. If his candidacy depended on supporting Taft, given the fraudulent methods used in obtaining his nomination, he would return to private life. But Kennedy claimed that Norris had been properly nominated and that no state committeeman had questioned his right to a place on the ticket. Norris' proposal, however, coming on the eve of the state convention, dramatically presented his views and took the initiative away from the regular Republicans.²³

The Red Willow County convention meeting in McCook on July 20 chose Norris as a member of its delegation and reiterated his views in a resolution which was unanimously adopted. Other counties also chose progressive delegates, and several conventions denounced Taft and the Chicago convention. A large majority of the counties comprising the Fifth Congressional District endorsed Norris' position. Meanwhile, Norris, who was expected to attend the state convention and perhaps to serve as temporary chairman and keynote speaker, announced at the last moment that pressure of congressional business would prevent his return. By remaining in Washington he would lose few, if any, votes from Democrats who intended to support him, and progressives would support him whether he attended or not. Taft men, unless they voted Democratic or forced him off the ticket, would have no alternative but to vote for him on election day. Thus Norris strengthened his position by staying in Washington during the convention.²⁴

Another factor which may have helped him decide not to attend the convention was that he expected a bitter battle to take place there. Previously, behind the scenes, he had indirectly tried to prevent such a battle from developing. In Omaha the county committee, controlled by Rosewater, had met on July 16 and called for the convening of the

Douglas County Convention on July 20. To be sure that they would control this convention, the committee appointed a group of their own members to select delegates to the convention and a committee to select their own successors. Norris, learning of these procedures from Rosewater's *Omaha Bee*, considered them brazen political skuldugery. He wrote to Howell, asking him to take the lead in calling for a genuine county convention. He also requested that Roosevelt write to Howell and urge him to take the lead in challenging Rosewater's manipulation of the Douglas County committee. But Roosevelt was of no help in this matter. While he agreed with Norris' sentiments, his solution was "to come out straight for the third ticket" rather than to submit to such infamy.²⁵

Thus at the state convention Taft men controlled the Douglas County delegation, the largest single delegation. Nine or ten counties had contested delegations, and in every instance both sets of delegates were on hand. Indications did not point to a harmonious gathering. The night before the convention was to get under way, leaders of the Taft and Roosevelt groups met together in a futile effort to resolve their differences. Norris sent a telegram which was indicative of the temper of most of the delegates. He insisted, "Any compromise is an unconditional surrender." At the same time he knew, despite bitter feeling between contending factions, that the progressive Republicans were in control.²⁶

McCarl played an important role at the convention, helping to organize progressives to combat any unforeseen tactics by Taft men. At a conference, the Taft leaders boldly demanded that Roosevelt electors get off the Republican ticket. Norris was informed, "They wanted the party name and the party machinery." Rebuffed at this informal meeting, the Taft men received a further blow the next day, July 31, when the Executive Committee, headed by Aldrich, decided most of the contested cases in favor of progressive delegates, thereby insuring their control of the convention by a large majority. Once these decisions were announced many of the regular Republican delegates, with the Douglas County delegation in the lead, reversed the procedure of the Chicago convention and walked out, bitterly complaining of what they called Governor Aldrich's "steam roller" tactics.²⁷

The real trouble came when Rosewater found himself unable to control John L. Kennedy, a Taft supporter and a member of the Executive Committee hearing the contested cases. Kennedy, deciding the cases on their merits, was compelled in most instances to support delegates favorable to Roosevelt. Rosewater, furious over Kennedy's be-

havior, decided to "bust the convention," and, largely through Kennedy's courageous stand, the progressive group gained control. This was not the opinion of all observers. None of the newspapers, according to McCarl, reported the facts fairly. But from his vantage point as a prominent delegate, McCarl saw Kennedy as the real hero of the state convention and Rosewater as the villain.²⁸

The platform enthusiastically adopted by the convention was short but vague as to the test of Republicanism. It made no mention of Taft, his administration, the Chicago convention, and used no vindictive language reflecting the division of the party. At the same time, the Taft delegates, who had walked out of the state convention, were holding a meeting and claiming that they were the only true Republicans. They intended to obtain a court order validating their contention. Rosewater moved that the state central committee be given the power to fill all vacancies on the Republican ticket with candidates who supported Taft.²⁹

Norris was warned not to attend the Progressive convention in Chicago and to stay away from the new party altogether. The third party, if and when it was organized in the state, could endorse his candidacy, but Norris' job was to remain in the Republican party and keep the control which progressive elements had firmly established as a result of the state convention. As McCarl explained it, "We can be Republicans without supporting Taft and that's what we are." Though there was disappointment in Lincoln because Norris was not present at the convention, there was also strong sentiment for him. The preliminaries, as far as Norris was concerned, were over. It was now his responsibility, as soon as Congress adjourned, to take his candidacy to the people of Nebraska.³⁰