Ever since the Nonpartisan League surged to power in North Dakota in 1916, most historians have presented generally favorable analyses of the organization, its accomplishments and its legacies. Here, however, Dale Baum challenges that interpretation. The NPL, he says, sought to bring the past into an uncertain future; they tried to "step out of time," and as such exemplified the regressive nature of most agrarian politics.

Above: Arthur Clark (A.C.) Townley, founder and president of the Nonpartisan League, guided the organization to political power in the northwest. This portrait was advertised in the League press as his "only authorized picture." Left: Popular NPL cartoonist John M. Baer often posed as "Hiram Rube," the symbolic character who represented the northwestern farmer. Baer, elected by the NPL to Congress in 1917, used the guise to emphasize his points during political "chalk talks" sponsored by the NPL.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

The New Day in North Dakota: The Nonpartisan League and the Politics of Negative Revolution

By Dale Baum

The overwhelming preponderance of writing pertaining to the Nonpartisan League was published in the time of its political ascendancy during the First World War and the following period of anti-radicalism known as the Red Scare. The Nonpartisan League left a wake of unequalled ill-feeling in those states in which it was a political force and particularly in North Dakota where it dominated political life in the state for many years. The historian can sample the acrimony of the times by a cursory reading of the contemporary writings or by glancing through the newspapers of the period. The history of the Nonpartisan League has been chronicled in an objective scholarly fashion by Professor Robert Loren Morlan in his book entitled *Political Prairie Fire* which stands alone as the definitive published work on the subject.

Morlan places the League in the tradition of western agrarian protest movements which he feels are characterized by a militant progressive reform spirit which has laid much of the foundation for "modern midwestern liberalism." Morlan points out that the reforms that the League advocated, which were considered radical proposals in 1916, are in a large measure the accepted practices of today. In his account of the Nonpartisan League, Morlan tends to recognize its achievements and to overlook to some degree its shortcomings. Morlan presents to the reader an image of the League closer to his own heart's desire by consistently manipulating an agreement between the League and his own principles of political liberalism. Consequently, there are complexities in the history of the League which Morlan's study does not bring into focus. Little, if any, analysis is made of the possible connections between the rise of the League and upper midwest isolationism, nativism, or anti-Semitism. Consequently, nothing is said about the subsequent careers of individuals like William Lemke, Lynn Frazier, William Langer, and Gerald Nye—all of whom were products of Nonpartisan League politics in North Dakota. Although Morlan mentions instances in the League's story of illiberal and undemocratic aspect, they appear as things that should not have been, but unfortunately did exist, or as things which can be somewhat justified by the logic of the situation.

This article will not attempt to re-tell the story of the Nonpartisan League which Morlan has already done so well. Instead it will concentrate on the ambiguous claim of the League to a part in a progressive and liberal American political tradition. The League had a dark side as well as a light one, and the attempt will be made here to detect and describe the darker side. In no way can the Nonpartisan League be called a fascist movement. It is a confusing mistake to see proto-Hitlers and Mussolinis behind American radical agrarian leaders, but a mistake that a small group of social and political scientists have fallen into.[1] One finds demagogues to be sure, but the meaning of the word "Fascist" has spilled over the bounds of analytical utility. The term simply awakes every conceivable response in historians of agrarian radicalism. The most influential re-interpretation of Populism and agrarian protest movements, Richard Hofstadter's *Age of Reform,* does not make this error. Hofstadter acknowledges that Populism was the first movement to attack seriously the problems created by industrialism and that these problems needed creative solution. What Hofstadter contends is that the Populists were farmers with a limited understanding of the complexities of their era. They often proposed solutions to problems which reflected their isolation from the best thought of the day. He implies that in the still more complex world of today, we cannot expect inspiration from such a parochial and limited social vision as was that of the agrarian reformers.

The Nonpartisan League saw the world in Manichean terms, as an eternal struggle between God and the Devil. The farmers in the state placed themselves in the hands of a Messiah who would lead them into a new golden age from out of an impure past. The Nonpartisan League is representative of a mode of political thought which characterizes many American reform movements. This is an ahistorical and transformationist mode of thought. The Nonpartisan League was attempting to step out of history and into a pure future intimately related to a lost Garden of Eden. They evoked a

1. Most notably Peter Viereck, Edward A. Shils, and Victor Ferkiss in, respectively, the following works: "The Revolt Against the Elite," in Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1963); *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1956); "Populist Influences on American Fascism," *Western Political Quarterly,* X (June 1957), 350-373.

nostalgia for the past symbolically more powerful than the impure past (and present) they spoke against. This mode of political thought had a pattern of sacred and profane images which the League called forth in its efforts to deal with the problems which faced the North Dakota wheat farmers.

The Nonpartisan League was thoroughly dominated by the personality and organizing genius of Arthur C. Townley. He was born in Browns Valley in western Minnesota in 1880. After attending high school in Alexandria and teaching school for a couple of years, he homesteaded in North Dakota. In 1906 he decided to go into wheat farming on a big scale near Cheyenne Wells, Colorado, and failed in this venture. He went back to North Dakota where he tried his hand at raising flax and for a time prospered. In 1912 he was pointed out by railroad and land agents as the "flax king of the northwest," and "a sterling example of what a man could do in a few years in this virgin country."[2] This same year there was an early frost and only a fraction of Townley's 8,000 acres of flax could be harvested. He figured that at best he could break even, but he was mistaken. To his horror he found that wild speculation had forced the market down to where he would get less than a dollar per bushel. A "plunger" by nature, Townley was used to taking defeats with a smile. But this time he was deeply embittered and was determined some day to beat the powers which had broken him.

Throughout Townley's career there was always a touch of a soured and embittered man who retained a deep hatred for the "food pirates" who had left him bankrupt. His hatred was at the base of the devastating use of sarcasm. After filing bankruptcy Townley joined the Socialist party. In 1914, he was employed as a special organizer for a so-called new "organizational department" of the party which was formed to test empirically the difference between the popularity of the Socialist party platform and the Socialist party itself. As was expected, the platform proved more popular than the party. Townley was very successful in getting farmers to join his experimental organization as long as the farmers did not have to sign any red Socialist membership cards.

The orthodox Socialists feared—apparently with good reason—that it was not dyed-in-the-wool Socialism that Townley was spreading among the farmers. The 1915 North Dakota Socialist party convention voted to discontinue the experimental program. The regular Socialists were inclined to believe that his converts were not really Socialists at all. Townley with his talk of a "state program" evidently was only an opportunist, a "yellow belly," a hated "reformer."[3] Miffed at the stupidity of the decision to terminate the experimental "organization department," Townley broke with the Socialist party.

It is interesting how strong in relative terms the Socialist party was in North Dakota at this time. After the Socialist party captured almost 6% of the national vote for president in 1912, the *New Republic* editorialized:

> In certain agricultural states, where there are few wage earners, and where farm-owners and tenants (who wish to become farm-owners) do not know what wage slavery is, the Socialist vote is comparatively strong. In Kansas, in Minnesota, in Texas, and in several other preponderately agricultural states, the proportionate Socialist vote is much larger than in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and other industrial states.[4]

But Townley knew that there was plenty of discontent in North Dakota not directed against capitalism as such, but against specific capitalist enterprises. He knew that "Socialism" to many people, especially farmers, was a bad word. It frightened them, and it failed to produce sufficient political unity to get results. The farmers were ready to destroy certain capitalist institutions, but they were not willing to commit themselves to erection of new "Socialist" institutions to replace them.

Shortly after Townley broke with the Socialist party, the Nonpartisan League began with his handshake with A. E. Bowen in 1915. Bowen thought that the farmers should unite in one nonpartisan movement and forget all distinctions of race, religion and politics. They could then capture the North Dakota state government. In telling about his agreement with Townley, Bowen quoted him as saying:

> Bowen, that's a damn good idea of yours. It's a winner. I can take that idea, old boy, and that name "nonpartisan" and organize the farmers so that they can sweep the State. But on one condition—I am to be boss. . . I can make a success of this thing. The farmers are ready for it. They have the Grange, the Farmers' Union, the Equity, and the farmers' clubs. They are disgusted with the old political parties. You are a good speaker but a poor organizer. Do you agree that I am boss? Now is our chance.[5]

And so the League began with Townley as its ruler in 1915.

One of Townley's first converts to the League was Frank B. Wood, a wealthy farmer of Deering, North Dakota, who had been a founder of the North Dakota Union of the American Society of Equity. Another was William Lemke, a man many thought was the brains behind Townley. William Lemke was a devout German Lutheran who neither smoked nor drank. His father fought with the Prussian army against France in 1870, and upon immigrating to America had taken his family to North Dakota in search of cheaper land. The Lemke family settled in the northwest part of the state and was successful enough so as to be able to send William to the University of North Dakota. A classmate of his recalled a bull session in which Lemke quoted from Karl Marx on class

2. Robert Loren Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 23.

3. Herbert E. Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 54.

4. *The New Republic* (December 12, 1914) quoted in Seymore M. Lipset, *Agrarian Radicalism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 12.

5. Arthur C. Townley quoted in Davis Douthit, *Nobody Owns Us* (Chicago: The Cooperative League of the United States of America, 1945), 94-95.

hatred. He recalled Lemke saying: "If I can find out what people hate most I can built a new political party around it."[6]

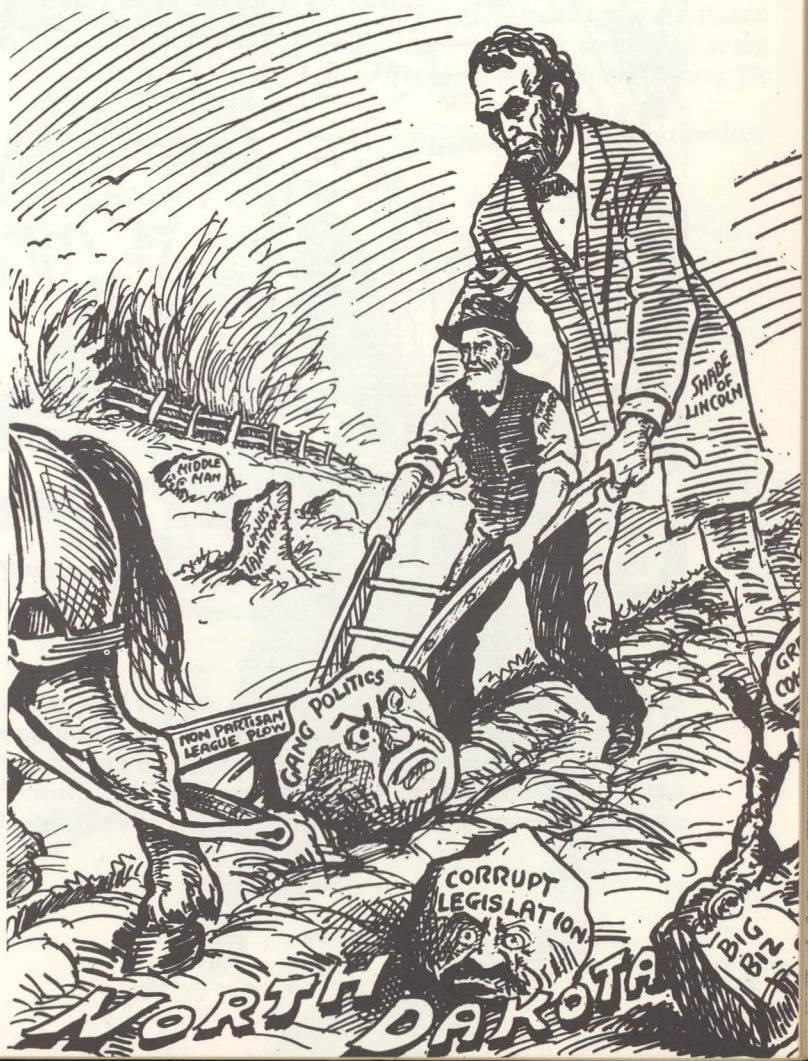
As a young lawyer in search of a short cut to wealth, Lemke organized a land company, the Land Finance Company of Mexico, which bought large parcels of real estate in Mexico to sell to land-hungry Americans. When the Mexican Revolution thwarted this imperialistic plan, he sought desperately, and in vain, to have President Woodrow Wilson intervene in Mexico. This explains much of Lemke's bitterness toward Wilson and his hatred of what he called the "war party" in Washington in 1917. Lemke later achieved national attention as Father Coughlin's Union Party candidate for president in 1936, and he adopted the campaign nickname of "Liberty Bell" Lemke. The liberty bell was the symbol of the 1924 LaFollette Progressive movement. In 1936 Lemke was still trying to discover what people hated most and what crackpot grievances they had so he could use that to build a new political party.

The discontent in the North Dakota wheat belt which an embittered Townley and a politically opportunistic Lemke capitalized on in 1915 was not the product of poverty or depression, and therefore the Nonpartisan League is something of a contradiction in light of a general inclination to look for or accept a hard-times explanation for protest movements among farmers. The World War I years were prosperous years, and yet out of this period came an agrarian struggle equalling in bitterness and intensity any revolt of previous decades. Morlan documents the story of how farmers in the wheat belt were for years tyrannized by the grain combine, the railroads and by an amazing arrangement of middlemen: line elevators, terminal elevators, commission houses, grain brokers, and speculators. Millions of dollars were in fact lost to the farmers of North Dakota each year because of unfair practices in the system of weighing, grading and marketing grain. But Morlan fails to place the farmers in the larger economic framework of the times.

During the World War One period the economic conditions in agriculture were generally more competitive than in industry, and farm prices fluctuated more widely than industrial prices. As farm prices rose, farmers became prosperous and sought eagerly to increase their incomes by putting more and more land under cultivation. This was not possible in Europe due to the manpower shortage of the war years and because there was a lack of equipment and fertilizers. But in the United States, as well as in Canada, Australia, and South America, land was brought under the plow which, because of lack of rainfall or inaccessibility to peacetime markets, should never have been put into cultivation. North Dakota farmers went into debt to buy these lands at often usurious interest rates. By 1920, they were buried under a pile of bank mortgages that would have been considered intolerable before 1914, but which in the boom of wartime prosperity and high farm prices was hardly given a second thought. It is true that agricultural wages, rents and interest rates on mortgages and loans all rose rapidly during 1917 and 1918, but, even at this time, not so rapidly as did the increase in the selling price of farm products. During these years farmers increased their personal incomes more rapidly than most other groups of people.[7]

But farmers were not content with this increase in income because they felt that their earnings were not commensurate with the capitalized value of their farms. Since 1900, the value of farm land had greatly increased, but this fact was a mixed blessing to the farmer. In 1910, the *Farm, Stock and Home* editorialized on the inflation of farm values:

> This increase of wealth he can neither eat nor wear, nor handle. True, his borrowing power is increased, but a mortgage is a contingent sale and by no means a desirable one. So far as the increased valuation is based upon increased production or earning power it is just and beneficial, but the ultimate result of inflation of farm values due to the present insane stampede after land will be the impoverishment of the farmer, rather than his enrichment.[8]



Using his Nonpartisan League plow, "the instrument for deliverance from graft and oppression," the North Dakota farmer "breaks some new ground," according to this cartoon taken from the June 18, 1916, Nonpartisan Leader. The plowing, assisted by the spirit of Lincoln, precedes the sowing of the "seed of better government."

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

6. William Lemke quoted in Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 139.

7. Carroll Quigley, *Tragedy and Hope* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), 260.

8. Quoted in Robert Henry Bahmer, "The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League," (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1941), 53.

Symbolism abounds in this W. C. Morris cartoon from the January 27, 1919, Nonpartisan Leader. The 1919 session of the North Dakota state legislature, meeting at the time this issue of the paper appeared, was in the process of enacting the total NPL program. Therefore, according to the League's point of view, "Hiram Rube" was indeed on top of the situation and certainly had his opponents and "oppressors" pinned down. Too, the anti-League press issued an endless stream of hostile propaganda, or noise (depending on one's point of view), against the NPL program.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

Spring wheat farming in North Dakota was entirely a commercial enterprise, and wheat farmers demanded profits normally expected of American business. Failing to realize such returns, they became restless. The unearned appreciation in the value of farm land was often the farmer's greatest single asset when he went into debt to buy more land. Richard Hofstadter writes that the product of the prairie was often "a harassed little country businessman who worked very hard, moved all too often, gambled with his land, and made his way alone."[9]

Richard Hofstadter distinguishes a "soft side" and a "hard side" to the agrarian movement in America, the first ideological and broadly humane, the other pragmatic and self-seeking. If the "hard" side of agrarianism means the avoidance by farmers' organizations of politics and the concentration of their efforts on campaigns to reduce the acreage of wheat, then little of the Nonpartisan League history would fall into the "hard" side of agrarianism. But there was a pragmatic, bread and butter side of the League in that much of its activity was directed toward specific goals, such as the establishment of state-owned grain elevators and state hail insurance. There was another side which was ideological. Many Nonpartisan Leaguers viewed the speculation in grain prices as the key to all that was wrong with their world.

North Dakota farmers, in 1915, insisted, in disregard of other economic factors, that their troubles originated in the evils existing in the system of marketing grain. The Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce,[10] which set the price of wheat, determined grades and buying conditions and conveniently controlled its own membership, was the main source of all evil. In this scenario, the Chamber of Commerce was a serpent that had slithered into the wheat growing regions of the Northwest to tempt men to surrender their roles as honest producers of the nation's wealth and enter into the artificial and parasitical world of price speculation. The farmers formed the Equity Cooperative Exchange to slay the serpent. The white knights of the Equity were imbued with soul-brother Robert LaFollette's "Wisconsin Idea" which combined marketing reform with other progressive reform measures. But progress was slow.

In 1915, the powerful financial and milling interests that rigidly controlled the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce combined with Alex McKenzie, a Republican party boss who ruled North Dakota from a St. Paul hotel, to defeat the efforts of the Equity in North Dakota to establish a state-owned terminal elevator in the eastern part of the state. Heaping insult upon injury, one of the state senators was quoted, somewhat out of context, as advising the farmers to "go home and slop the hogs," and let the legislators make the laws. The "McKenzie ring" symbolized to the farmers the new corporate feudal aristocracy in their Republican party which had reduced their state to a tributory province of the Twin Cities. Farmers in North Dakota consistently refused

9. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 46.

10. The Minneapolis Grain Exchange and not the usual organization of this name. The name was changed on January 1, 1947.

An excellent example of the NPL's use of the negative symbol, this John M. Baer cartoon from the June 15, 1916, Nonpartisan Leader personifies the League's opposition as the devil incarnate. NPL cartoonists frequently used this device.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

Anti-NPL politicians, when not portrayed as devils, often manifested other disagreeable characteristics when they were caricatured in the League press. This John M. Baer drawing appeared in the January 13, 1919, Nonpartisan Leader.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

to vote Democratic because they were loyal to the party of Abraham Lincoln which had purged from the land the feudal institution of slavery.

Fifteen months after the defeat of the elevator issue, Townley had enrolled 40,000 farmers in his Farmers' Nonpartisan League. The quick and astonishing rise of the Nonpartisan League was not due to its platform alone.[11] Townley had organized his movement precisely at the time to benefit from the campaign of the Equity Cooperative Exchange. It was the Equity that inspired the spirit of protest that was marshalled by Townley into a triumphant political organization. Also, Townley's method of having his organizers work on a commission basis was not only productive of revenue, but also a source of organizational vitality that could never be aroused today in the same way. Townley argued that any farmer who put his money into a project would stick with it even if only to get a return on his investment: "Make the rubes pay their God-damn money to join and they'll stick—stick till hell freezes over."[12]

Townley's instructions to League organizers on how to talk to a prospective member are memorable, if only for their picturesque profanity:

> Find out the damn fool's hobby and talk it. If he likes religion talk Jesus Christ; if he is against the government damn the Democrats; if he is afraid of whiskey preach prohibition; if he wants to talk hogs, talk hogs—talk anything he'll listen to, but talk, talk until you get his God-damn John Hancock to a check for six dollars.[13]

Great emphasis was put on organization. Townley stressed the right psychological moment to hand the prospective member a membership card and a pen. Townley's frequent meetings for organizers became refresher courses in salesmanship, including such topics as "Motives by Which Men Act—how to analyze the individual and attack vulnerable points."[14]

The important ingredient in Townley's success was his own ability as a speaker. He was a natural platform speaker who won over audiences by his ability to speak their language and by the sheer force of his personality. His speeches put the farmer in the role of the injured innocent citizen fighting to preserve his freehold farm against a class of nonproducing middlemen who, like medieval barons, collected fees from the shipping that passed their castles. His speeches played adroitly upon the old spirit of Populism that was still very much alive in the wheat belt. Townley could talk for hours about "Big Biz," the "plutocracy," and the "kept press." He touched on all the themes in the old Populist creed: The coming of a "new day" in North Dakota recalled the old Populist idea of a golden age; the conflicts between wealth owners and wealth producers, as it was declaimed by Townley, resembled the old Populist dualist version of social struggles.

The economic philosophy of the League which taught that the toilers of the soil and the factory are the real producers of the nation's wealth was offered to the labor movement as an ideological basis for a farmer-labor alliance. This was a throwback to the Omaha platform of 1892. And the Omaha platform had been little more than a repetition of earlier pleas for a united front built on the same ideas. The labor-cost-theory of value had long been shared by the National Labor Union, the Industrial Congress and the Knights of Labor. The concept, derived from classical economics, was that goods are worth an amount of money commensurate with the amount of labor that has gone into the production of the goods. This idea of a natural harmony of interests among productive classes based on the labor-cost-theory of value was not espoused by organized labor in North Dakota in 1915. The North Dakota State Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) cooperated with the League for purely opportunistic reasons.

A large gap between League rhetoric and reality existed with reference to the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) because there was no natural harmony of interests among the I.W.W. agricultural workers and the farmer membership of the League. To prevent any reoccurrence of the labor strife that characterized the 1916 harvest season, the League came to an agreement the following year with the Agricultural Workers Organization No. 400 (which at this time was the financial mainstay of the entire I.W.W.). The League's proposal to the I.W.W. of all-over collective bargaining was prevented only by the anti-I.W.W. war hysteria which took the form of legal prosecution of the union leadership in September, 1917. The Nonpartisan League then disavowed any connection with the I.W.W. The League's agreement with the union was subsequently characterized by the League's enemies as a desire of the League's Socialist hierarchy to bring about an era of sovietism.[15] The League could ill afford to have a labor problem of its own while it was pushing the idea of the harmony of interests among toilers of farm and factory as the basis of an alliance with organized labor. Organized labor in Minnesota was driven into political cooperation with the League in that state by the anti-labor stance of Governor Burnquist and the infamous Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, not because of the League propaganda about the underlying interests of the productive majority being the same. The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party sprang out of this political alliance in 1918.

The origins of the "nonpartisan" politics from which the League took its name can be traced to Theodore Roosevelt's dramatic desertion of the Republican party in 1912 and his call for a "partyless" democracy that would see the spontaneous expression of the will of the people triumph over evil. "We stand at Armageddon, and we battle for the Lord," announced the "Bull Moose" at the Progressive Party conven-

11. The initial League program in 1915 advocated state-owned elevator and flour mills, state rural credit banks, state-owned packing houses and cold storage plants, state inspection of grain, exemption of farm improvements from taxation, and state hail insurance.

12. Arthur C. Townley quoted in Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 27.

13. *Ibid.,* 139.

14. *Ibid.,* 28.

15. See Jerry Dempster Bacon, *Townleyism Unmasked! Now Stands Before the World in Its True Light as Radical Socialism* (Grand Forks, N.D.: the author, 1919).

tion.[16] In attacking the existing political parties in North Dakota as "useless for the farmers' purpose," Townley was dramatizing the League's separation from traditional corrupt politics and represented a new pure politics that was to be guided by "selfless" experts who sought no political office or personal aggrandizement for themselves. The top hierarchy of the League was barred from running for any public office. This fundamental League rule was broken first by Lemke in 1918 with unfortunate consequences.

Townley had correctly diagnosed that the Socialist Party had placed too much responsibility on the farmers for the existing evils. Townley did not preach to the farmers about how they should better understand economics, the business of farming, how they should plan more intelligently, or how they should avoid bankers if possible and work with other farmers in cooperative enterprises. Townley put all the blame on "Big Biz" and on the "crooks" and "tools of Big Biz" and other "enemies of the people." The farmers were absolved of all responsibility for evil in the political-religious framework within which the League promised the farmer salvation. Farmers were free from the necessity of feeling any personal sense of failure and from the necessity of doing anything constructive. They were simply to place their faith in Townley. The farmers themselves need not worry about having to struggle personally with the problem of eliminating evil because the League would take care of things. The rise of the Nonpartisan League and the concommitant creation of an ideal community would be so spontaneous and natural that individual farmers would not even have to sacrifice any of their autonomy and political independence through participation in group action. The League was less a movement of the people than for the people.

The Nonpartisan League was a highly centralized political machine organized from the top down. A self-perpetuating executive committee of Townley, Lemke and Wood controlled everything. Much was made of the difference in effectiveness between "a democratic army" and "an army fighting for democracy." The League, it was argued, had to be organized upon the latter model in order to protect it from political enemies. Of course, once the democracy for which the League was fighting was established, then neither a League nor a commander would be necessary. This withering away of the original organization has its parallel in the predictions of Marxist doctrine. The last people to worry about the "undemocratic" situation were the League's members. They had placed themselves in the hands of a new Messiah who just might be able to deliver the goods.

16. Theodore Roosevelt quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 419.

17. J. Edmund Buttree, *The Despoilers* (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1920), 8.

18. *The Leader* (Bismarck) quoted in Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 54.

19. *The Nonpartisan Leader,* February 22, 1917, quoted in Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 93.

20. See Robert Jay Lifton, *History and Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1971), Chapter II.

On the campaign trail, Townley spoke to crowds of febrile enthusiasm. Often the political rallies held by the League resembled old-fashioned religious revival meetings. Townley, as he spoke, looked like a priest of a religion that was passing through the stage of miracles. He called on the crowds to rise up and smite the devil of "Big Biz." He played to the hilt the role of an American Moses come to lead the farmers in their fight against the ungodly speculation and monopolistic price-fixing of the Minneapolis wheat combines. A partisan contemporary wrote that the farmers of North Dakota, "believed that they were right; that theirs was a righteous cause; that another Saviour had come down to earth to save them, and profiting by experience, they knew better than to crucify him."[17] New League members were like people who had just gotten religion. The conversion experience was alive and meaningful among the wheat farmers who then spread the League gospel to their friends.

In the fall election of 1916 in North Dakota, Townley was able to accomplish the League's goals almost completely. The League elected every one of its candidates for state office except state treasurer. They elected their man for governor, Lynn J. Frazier, "the modern Cincinnatus" who was "called from the plow to head his people and govern a great state,"[18] their man for Attorney General, William Langer; and a majority of the House of Representatives. The League had used the direct primary to get its men elected. It sought to put over its own slate of candidates whether they were Republicans or Democrats. The Republican primary was, of course, the main battleground. Had it not been for the senators whose terms had not expired, they would have won control of the State Senate. It was this lack of control of the upper chamber which prevented the League from putting over its most important measure, a bill for a new state constitution framed to give the farmers all the things they could possibly hope for. The coming of a new day in North Dakota did not come in 1916; the millennium was postponed until 1918.

Of course, farmers were highly pleased with their success in 1916. The *Nonpartisan Leader* waxed eloquent over the promise of the future. If "Japanese nation" is substituted for "United States" in the quotation below, the words and imagery used could have been written by a radical left wing Japanese youth of present day:

> The United States is on the verge of one of those great political and economic revolutions that periodically shake nations to their foundations, revise old ways of thinking and doing things and make way for building anew on the ruins of outgrown ideals and institutions. . . The armies of progress are being organized. Their way is lighted by enthusiasm and loyalty to the cause. The bands are playing. The slogans of the people marching on to new and better things fill the air. This inspired army is passing your door. It is marching to victory as certain as the rising of the sun tomorrow.[19]

It has been argued that this kind of imagery reflects individual psychological tendencies which are inevitable elements in the historical process itself.[20]

The most famous of the anti-NPL cartoons, this illustration of the League's alleged effect on the North Dakota school system appeared in the January, 1920, Red Flame.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

Below: Anti-League propagandists invoked the traditional symbols to lend weight to their campaign against the NPL program. Cartoonist Thomas H. Foley of the Independent Voter's Association magazine, The Red Flame, here visualized the supposed threat to American institutions that enactment of the NPL program promised.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

The Nonpartisan League was going to recapture a vitality and regain a vision of a future of fulfillment rather than despair. New pure forms would somehow emerge from the wreckage of the profane past. All that was needed was control of the Senate for the new day to arrive. Meanwhile, the pomp and ceremony of the executive and judicial branches of the government of North Dakota gave way to simplicity and informality under League control. Governor Frazier, upon taking office, promptly announced that the customary inaugural ball would be dispensed with. There was no need for artificial superfluities. The ultimate in folksiness was achieved by the Supreme Court Justice J. E. Robinson, a partner in Lemke's Land Finance Company of Mexico, who started the practice of publishing a weekly news letter in which he freely discussed the doings of the court in the style of a "Personals" column of a country weekly. The League justice was intent on proving that the state now had a truly democratic court in which pretentious ceremony had given way to a sort of neighborly informality and, presumably, to the pure substance of justice. Training or competence or artful creativity were unnecessary embellishments of natural God-given common sense.

In the legislative branch, the League was also to be guided by a kind of informality in which the will of the people would be spontaneously expressed. Spontaneity, as Townley knew, could not be left to chance, but must be prepared for, even rehearsed. Yet, public information on the amount of preparation it took to be spontaneous would destroy the public's belief in the spontaneity. Although the newly elected legislators were systematically drilled by Townley and Lemke with instructions on parliamentary procedure, Townley later described the early League caucuses in this manner:

> The new League legislators were good men, but weren't used to speaking in public, while most of the opposition were able to talk indefinitely. Those fellows didn't feel at home in a legislative chamber, so we took the chairs and tables out of the hotel dining room, put in a few benches, and spread a little straw around. . . They'd come down there and sit and they felt perfectly at ease. They began to talk to each other and to argue, and before we knew it they were over in the legislature outtalking the best of them.[21]

It made a good story and Townley loved to retell it.

The Nonpartisan League took control of all three branches of the North Dakota government with a smashing victory at the polls in 1918. Reporters from the east coast were present in Bismarck for the opening of the 1919 legislative session to write about how a "bolshevik" political organization had seized control of one of the forty-eight states. The League press proclaimed: "Farmers and workers all over the United States are looking toward this state in the hope that its law-makers will write a new Declaration of Independence which will free the producers of America from the oppressive shackles of monopolistic exploiters."[22] The League had a

21. Arthur C. Townley quoted in Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 96.

22. *The Capitol Daily Press* (Bismarck), February 6, 1919, quoted in Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 227.

mission to perform not unlike the errand into the wilderness of the Puritans of 17th century Massachusetts. The "elect" of North Dakota were about to establish a new government in America which would preserve them from the corruptions of the world. North Dakota would be "like a city on a Hill," the eyes of all reformers upon it. If the League succeeded in its mission, perhaps the rest of the world would say; "The Lord make it like that of North Dakota."

The League press went on to say:

> If any League legislator is planning to double cross his fellow legislators and his constituents–let us give him one piece of advice in advance. Let him prepare to leave North Dakota. Let him lay his plans to move to some remote territory. North Dakota will be too hot for him. He will be remembered forever as the Judas of the farmers' movement. And if he has children, let him reflect that he will betray them, too–that his treachery will mean their name is forever disgraced.[23]

Perhaps the League traitors could be banished to Rhode Island, this state having claim to being the first remote territory in America to serve as a place of exile for heretics. By breaking his covenant with Townley and Lemke, the traitorous League member would insure that his seed would not be included and thereby would be punished for his failure to keep the covenant.

A parallel between the minds of twentieth century North Dakota and seventeenth century Massachusetts again is suggested by the words of one of the many so-called "non-resident preachers and ministers," a California Socialist by the name of Walter Thomas Mills. Mills reminded the League members at their party caucus that the eyes of the world were upon them:

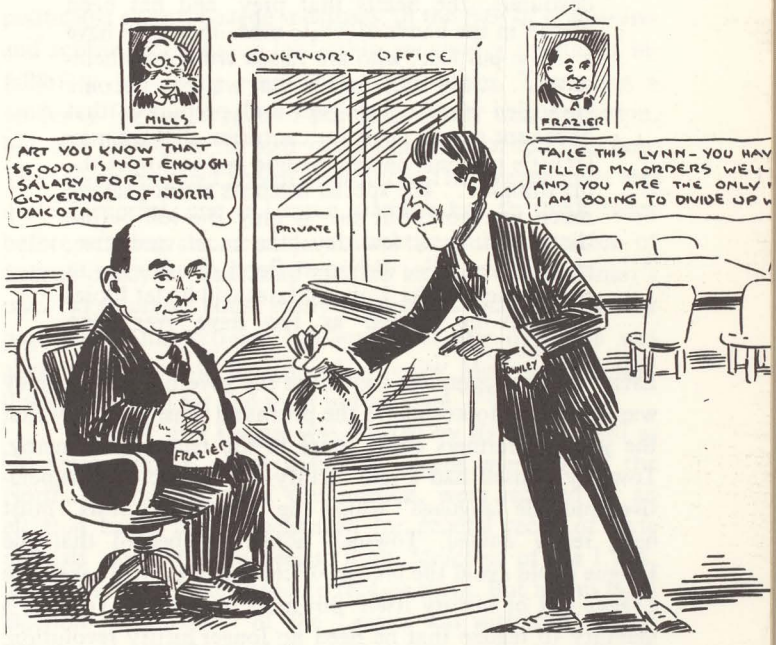
23. *Ibid.*, 228.

24. Walter Thomas Mills quoted in William Langer, *The Nonpartisan League* (Mandan, N.D.: Morton County Farmers Press, 1920), 123.

> Even in Europe they know the state of North Dakota is trying out a new kind of social democracy which will make the rich poorer and the poor richer, a democracy which will wipe out the lumber trust, the doctor trust and every other kind of trust. This democracy will bury all the trusts–it will take the government away from the trusts, and put it back into the hands of the people.[24]

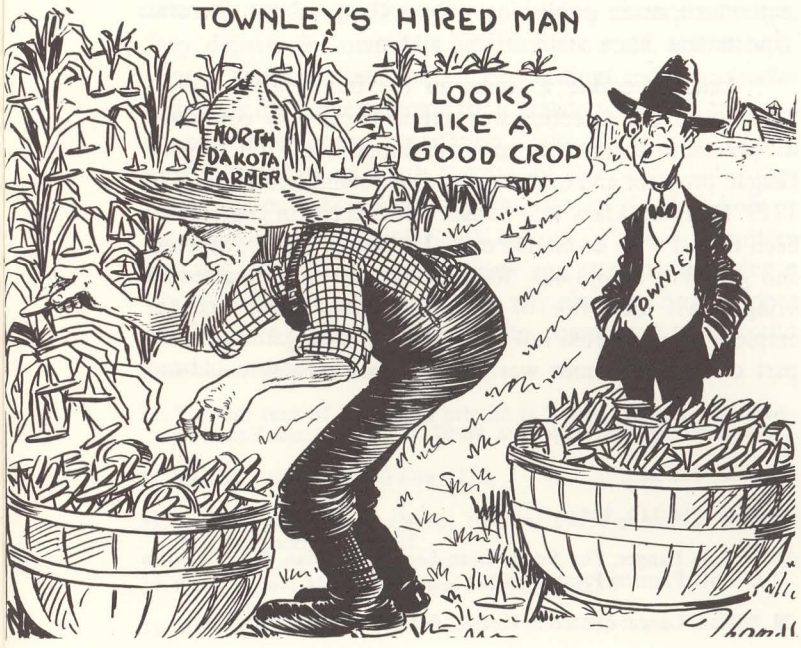
Once the corrupt past was buried, a new social democracy could be built. The Puritans likewise had to bulldoze the institutions of the medieval world before beginning a new society based on God's truth.

Mills allegedly spoke to a caucus for hours upon hours trying to inspire the League legislators with an apocalyptic vision of the millennium that would begin once the grain combine was plowed under and buried. After hours of such unrealistic abstractions and meaningless verbiage, someone



Above: Governor Lynn Frazier came in for his full share of the abuse handed out by the Red Flame to NPL leaders. A part of the charge that he was Townley's "hired man," this cartoon implies that Frazier shared in the wealth that Townley allegedly accumulated from the NPL's political dominance in North Dakota.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection



The Red Flame often depicted A.C. Townley as a "fast operator" who was using the Nonpartisan League as a source of personal wealth. Although no proof to support these charges was ever brought forward, IVA cartoonist Thomas H. Foley delighted in opportunities to imply that the League president was indeed "milking" the farmers.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

would make a motion that the report of the steering committee be adopted. This inner circle, known as the steering committee of the caucus, was dominated by Townley and Lemke and considered all matters before they were submitted to the caucus with the exception of the League legislative program bills which had been drawn up in Townley's St. Paul offices. Morlan calls these secret legislative caucuses for League legislators "somewhat novel." Actually the caucus, where members pledged to vote in the chambers in accordance with majority vote of the caucus, constituted the significant functioning of at least the lower house of the legislature, as Morlan admits.[25]

Townley's address before the opening party caucus was uncharacteristically solemn; gone were the rabble-rousing techniques. He said:

> For the first time in the history of the United States the law making power of a sovereign state has been taken away from the exploiters and devourers, the beasts that prey, and has been placed in the hands of white men—men who have a noble purpose, who are raised from out themselves. . . . My only fear is that we may become entangled in the jealousies and prejudices that have kept people apart for centuries, that we may let little personal desires intrude and so forget the big things. . . . The special interests are not saying much just now, but this is only the lull before the storm. In a few days the most vindictive, vituperative, vile, dishonest flood of criticism in the history of the United States will be let loose. We will be abused as few have ever been abused. . . [26]

Even though in complete control of the government, Townley was still trying to keep alive the profound sense of injury that the yeoman farmers could share in the face of the enemy. Townley himself had a rare facility for "vindictive, vituperative, and vile language" which the "special interests" must have really envied. Townley actually expected that the League could avoid the lessons of centuries. He had taken the League out of history itself. But more serious was Townley's inability to realize that he need no longer justify revolution, but that it was time to assist in working out by concensus a definition of the new day in North Dakota.

Enemies of the League saw it as an organization thriving on class hatred and seeking revolutionary changes in the American way of life. They were convinced that Townley was a czar of a political machine that would destroy North Dakota by putting it in a state of economic serfdom. Townleyism was, for them, the serpent threatening to destroy the purity and innocence of the Northwest with its artificial socialistic patterns of government. North Dakota was divided into two bitterly hostile factions. In part, this division reflected a traditional rural-town antagonism in that the townspeople in the trading enclaves of the wheat belt were, as might be expected, often fiercely anti-League.

By 1919, the old political party lines in North Dakota had practically been obliterated. The core of opposition to the League was the Independent Voters Association (I.V.A.). Every plank of the League platform was written into law, but the promised golden age was undermined in part by a disastrous division in the ranks of the League. There were some very minor splits before 1919, but nothing close to the political schism caused by the defection of Attorney General Langer and two other state office holders. Among other things, Langer publicly charged that "Big Chief" Townley had allowed a few ill-conceived and poorly managed private enterprise schemes use the League's name along with his endorsement. One of the largest of these ventures was the Consumers' United Stores Company, established to distribute merchandise to the farmer members at wholesale cost plus ten percent. One who purchased a certificate gained thereby no voice in the control of the enterprise—he purchased simply the right to buy at the store. "Surely this was paternalism of a high degree," comments Morlan. More to the point, the ten percent was used for political activity, and League leaders did not restrict themselves to ten percent. The Stores Company did more to provide revenue for the League than it did to aid the farmer. In discussing these "occasional mistakes," Morlan emphasizes the ends when there are dubious methods used to gain the purported intentions of these enterprises. He suggests this perspective for viewing the League: "Occasional mistakes do not invalidate. . . a program any more than the existence of occasional political corruption negates the values of democracy."[27] Obviously, no one can be against democracy.

In a preface to a polemic he wrote about the League in 1920, Langer states: "Shortly after my re-election, I voluntarily, because of their lack of faithfulness to their membership, their autocracy and their political rottenness, commenced war on the leaders of the League in an attempt to get real tax paying farmers and not Socialists at the head of it."[28] If it could not be proved that Townley had betrayed the farmers, then Langer said that he would "stand convicted as a self-confessed liar and an assassinator of character, a man more despicable than the ghoul that sneaks out under the cover of darkness into 'No Man's Land' and robs the dead."[29] Langer also stook to be convicted under a League-passed "anti-liars" act which made publishing untrue things about the state government by a state official a crime.

Langer became a leader in the Independent Voters Association. His defection was serious because he continued to proclaim loudly his undying support of the original League program and of the enterprises established under it in 1919. Everyone knew that Langer felt that North Dakota had been cursed with economic evils. His hatred for profiteering and gambling in options, for speculators who conspired to bring down the price of wheat at harvest time, and for employers who would not allow collective bargaining on the part of their workmen was well-known. Townley could not

25. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 96-97.

26. *Ibid.,* 222-223.

27. *Ibid.,* 115-117, 335.

28. William Langer, *The Nonpartisan League* (Mandan, N.D.: Morton County Farmers Press, 1920), 5.

29. William Langer quoted in Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 243.

convincingly portray Langer as an "enemy of the farmer" or a "tool of Big Biz."

The "anti-liars" law passed by the League legislature in 1919 was described by Morlan as "unworthy of the high ideals of liberalism to which the League professed to subscribe."[30] It was a strange and unique law which made it a felony for a state official to "willfully publish any false statement in regard to any of the state departments, institutions or industries which. . . shall tend to deceive the public and create a distrust of the state officials or employees in charge of such departments, institutions or industries, or which tends to obstruct, hinder and delay the various departments, institutions and industries of the state." The crime was punishable by imprisonment in the state penitentiary for a term of one year, by a fine of $5000.00, or both.[31] Langer's book was written as a direct challenge to this act. He vaingloriously called upon any county attorney general in the state to arrest him; if he were not convicted, it would be proof that he was speaking the truth.

The League found itself on the defensive after this split in its ranks, and it tried to protect its program with repressive measures, such as the "anti-liars" law, of which Morlan bluntly states, "it is just as well that they never went into effect."[32] But other illiberal measures did go into effect. A League newspaper printing bill gave a Commission of Public Printing the power to designate a newspaper in every county in which state legal publications must be made. This did deprive many non-League newspapers of a great deal of revenue. It was mistakenly thought by many that all public notices were not good if placed in a paper not designated by the state. Another statute created an office of state sheriff. The state sheriff was to be appointed by the governor, and all sheriffs and deputies in the state were to be made members of a state constabulary subject to the direction of the state sheriff. Another statute created a special investigation committee, popularly known as the "smelling committee," which was given wide powers to examine or investigate upon the written complaint of any person or upon its own initiative, "any department or public office of this state, and all acts, efforts, attempts, transactions, proceedings and conspiracies to destroy the property, reputation, freedom, right or business of any person, group, association, company or group of persons in the state of North Dakota, or any of the industries, enterprises or utilities owned by the state of North Dakota or the credit of the state of North Dakota."[33] This committee was also empowered to investigate any attempts at violence or corruption in connection with any election. Any member of this committee as well as the committee itself could issue subpoenas and search warrants and could compel attendance, testimony, and the production of documentary evidence. Twenty-five thousand dollars was appropriated and deposited in the Bank of North Dakota to the credit of a League state senator, as chairman, and was subject to no check as to its expenditure.

Power was wrenched from the state Superintendent of Schools; her reaction to this seizure was described by Morlan as "melodramatic." It was, however, fittingly in the style of retort that the League had made mandatory by its use of sacred and profane categories. The deposed superintendent said: "The fight is not a political fight; it is a fight between civilization and Christianity on the one hand and Socialism and atheism, masquerading under the guise of a 'farmers' program,' on the other."[34]

Needless to say, these laws and actions raised a storm of opposition. The League itself would have probably denounced violently these acts had they been passed by the "old gang" politicians as anti-League measures. In the face of opposition and schism, the League leadership assumed a mantle of infallibility in solving every and all problems. There was a tendency for the League to pillory not only the opposition, but also anyone in its own ranks who did not fall into line. The League crucified honest opposition. The League press was quite powerful, and a League member had to think twice before offering sincere and constructive public criticism of League policy or leadership because he knew that Townley's own "kept press" could easily blacken his character all over page one. This extreme intolerance of any deviation was always defended on the grounds of unity. Morlan writes that it was "uncalled for and most unfortunate."[35]

In 1921, the League was hoisted by its own petard as Governor Frazier, along with the League members of the North Dakota Industrial Commission, were recalled by an election based on a mechanism for general recall of state officials passed by the League itself. Members of the I.V.A. were selected by the voters to replace them. But in this same election the program of the League was sustained; so the I.V.A. was in office with a mandate to put the League program into effect! This was the result of six years of bitter social and political strife in North Dakota. Of course, things were not as bad in North Dakota as the I.V.A. said. There was still no state mill and elevator, but everyone now looked forward to its completion. The Bank of North Dakota was in bad shape, but there was room for differences of opinion over some of its policies. The state hail insurance and the fire and tornado insurance systems were undeniably successful. North Dakota had a more progressive scheme of taxation. And the various new aspects of the state grain inspection program had proven extremely valuable.

The League had failed in the herculean task it defined for itself. It could not keep a large group of people sufficiently excited over the cause once victory had ostensibly been won. The vitality and inspiration which had given the League its success before 1919 was from then on forced to get behind the positive and creative political process of defining new institutions, and the vitality was speedily sapped and the

30. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 276.

31. The full text of this act is printed in William Langer, *The Nonpartisan League,* 7.

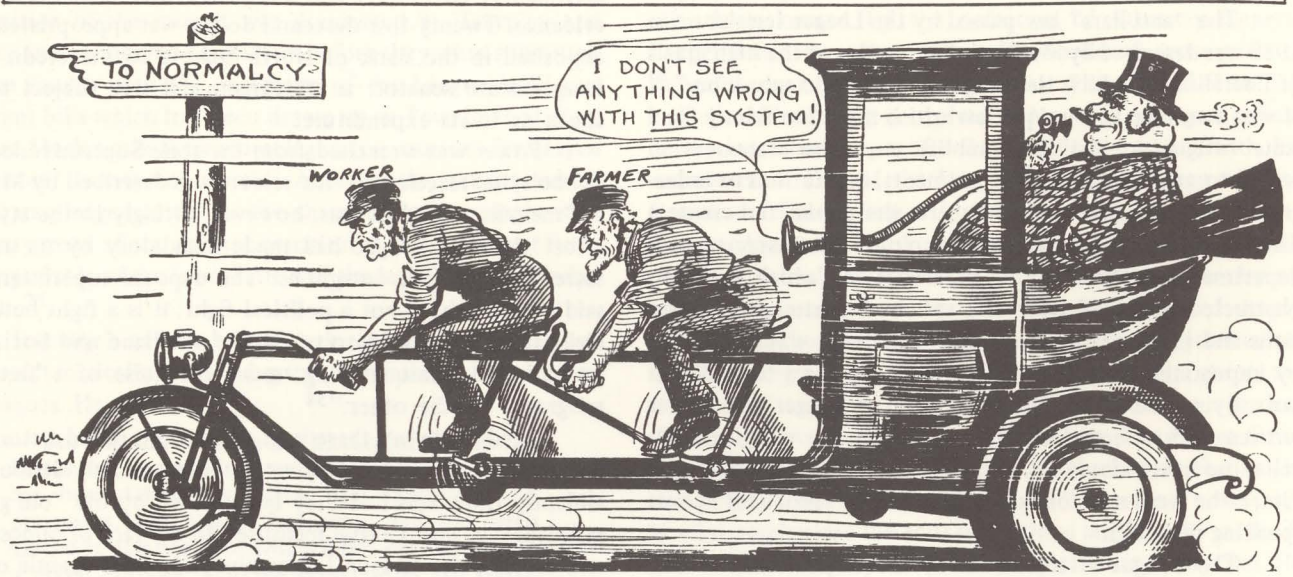
32. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 276.

33. Special Session Laws (North Dakota) 1919, quoted in Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 275.

34. Robert Loren Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire,* 254.

35. *Ibid.,* 266.

BAER SAYS THIS MACHINE IS THE LATEST MODEL "MOTO-BIG-BIZ-A-BUS"



League philosophy declared that the farmer and the worker provided useful labor to society while the financiers and middlemen lived on the proceeds of that labor. John M. Baer portrayed how the NPL felt the system operated in this drawing in the April 3, 1922, National Leader.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

inspiration lost in the process. From 1919 on, the old crusading spirit was less in evidence, and Townley was less appealing as a speaker in this new defensive position. When the League's "negative revolution" stopped in 1919, the League started to see only traitors and liars, the inevitable consequence of a political movement which tries to join political abstractions, like "the new day in North Dakota," with a political reality, or which tries to seek instantaneous perfection in a decidedly imperfect world. The League had become another political party rather than being truly nonpartisan. It had developed its own groups of professional politicians, and the League, now organizing in thirteen states, advertised for " 'personnel' to help organize the farmers."

The League position on the impending war was contained in a statement by Townley, made at St. Paul on March 21, 1917:

> Let capital throw its resources into the war game unselfishly and the 100,000 farmers of the Northwest will throw their resources and their blood if necessary into the game, just as enthusiastically.
>
> It is apparent that munitions, armor and steel plants would be the gainers by a conflict. It is generally believed that the munitions plants are responsible for a propaganda to involve this nation in the European conflict.
>
> We have. . . [petitioned] the administration to maintain peace with honor. We favor absolute neutrality–but not peace at any price. It is our firm purpose to stand by our nation, with our lives and prosperity in case of war.[36]

In speeches such as this one, Townley stirred up not only the old agrarian hatred of the money interests, but also the emotions of many of those who were opposed to American involvement in World War I. Samuel Lubell has stressed the importance of the ethnic population in the Upper Midwest in his discussion of American isolationism and concludes that support of Nonpartisan League candidates was often the result of pro-German sympathies among voters of German, Scandinavian and Irish origins, rather than of their economic beliefs.[37] No analysis of the League as essentially an alliance between those seeking reform of the marketing system of grain and those opposed to American involvement in the first World War is found in Morlan's story, and this lack of analysis is one of the more serious shortcomings of his book.

Unquestionably, Townley exploited anti-British sentiment among North Dakota's large immigrant population for political advantage. As American casualty lists grew longer, Townley told his audiences:

> We have been dragged into war by American autocracy; dragged into a war we did not want and we are told that it is a war to liberate the people from control of autocracy. Who started this war? I will tell you. It was the big-bellied, red-necked plutocrats. Their big bellies will stop more bullets than the bodies of our slim, young men, whom they are taking from their families.[38]

Yet, it is a mistake to attribute North Dakota's isolationist attitudes to an ethnic factor alone, even if the discus-

36. Arthur C. Townley quoted in Robert P. Wilkins, "The Nonpartisan League and Upper Midwest Isolationism," XXXIX *Agricultural History* (April 1965), 104-104.

37. See Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), Chapter VII.

38. Arthur C. Townley quoted in Samuel Lubell, *American Politics,* 138.

sion is limited to the World War I period. At that time, it was predictable that an emergency structure to mobilize Americans for war would be centered not around the isolated farmer, but of necessity around the local bankers, grain buyers, merchants and commercial club members who were often the only local leaders. In these people the farmer saw his economic opponents, those townspeople who he felt profited unjustly at his expense and whom he probably disliked more than the Kaiser. As the *New Republic* stated in an article entitled, "The Farmer and the War," in 1917: "A grain buyer, suspected of using a short scale, declares that this is a war for universal participation in the world's good things. Liberty bonds have not the best chance of being taken quickly when their salesman is a local banker suspected of having done his best to block the enactment of a state rural credits law."[39]

The answer to the question of what is the relationship of the League to isolationism can be only partly understood by reference to the tradition of strong ethnic patterns in North Dakota. The rest of the answer is understood by realizing that what Townley said in St. Paul in 1917 was believed to be the truth of the matter and is still felt by many to be the truth of the matter today in North Dakota. This is the belief that military preparations and the taxation they require benefit the coast which promotes them. Such spending forces the abatement of internal improvements and of federal agricultural assistance. That this belief is deeply engrained in the provincial minds of North Dakotans can be verified by traveling through the state and talking with its people today.

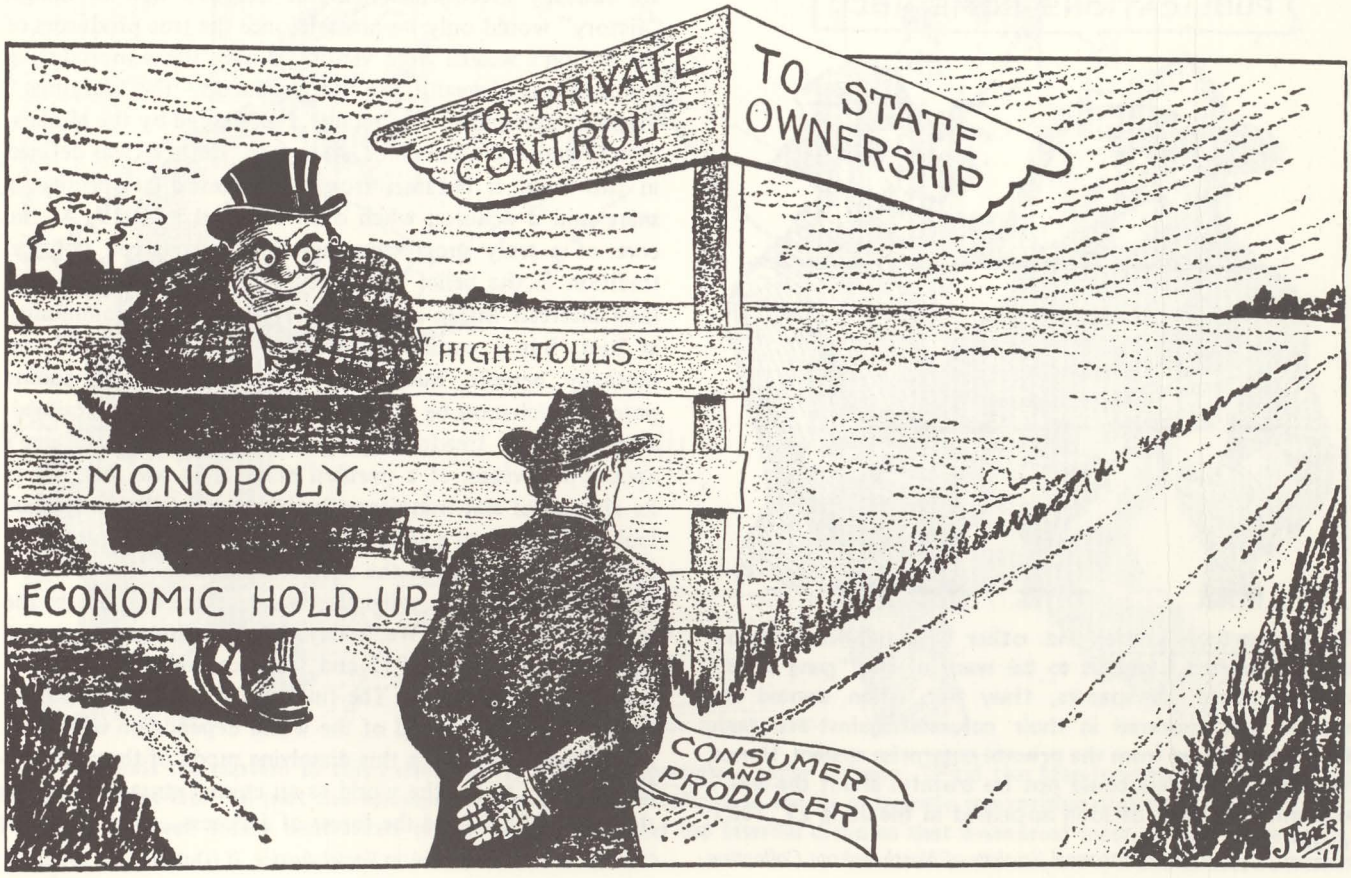
It has been argued that the Nonpartisan League represented the degeneration of Populism into incipient fascism.[40] This is an error in analysis and one which need not be embraced in a re-interpretation of the Nonpartisan League. Undeniably, many products of Nonpartisan League politics, not only from North Dakota, but from other surrounding states as well, came to the conclusion during the Depression that capitalism really was not worth saving. Consequently, they were willing to try to experiment with some bold new economic system. This probably explains Gerald Nye's association with French elitist Alexis Carrel in a plan to institute a guild system in the United States. It probably explains the role Tom Amlie, a one-time League organizer in Wisconsin, played in the founding of the American Commonwealth Political Federation. And it helps explain William Lemke's candidacy for president on Father Coughlin's Union party ticket. Such incidents and others like them in the subsequent

39. *The New Republic,* XIII (November 3, 1917), 8-9.

40. See Victor C. Ferkiss, "Populist Influences on American Fascism," *The Western Political Quarterly,* X (June 1957), 350-373.

John M. Baer entitled this drawing, "At the Parting of the Ways," and supplied within it the choice the NPL claimed was facing the consumer and producer; either he continued down the obstacle-laden path of private control, or he took the open road of public ownership. The cartoon was printed in the January 25, 1917, Nonpartisan Leader.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection



careers of other men do not establish the Nonpartisan League as the seedbed from which fascism flowered forth. The League had no monopoly on men who would become disillusioned with American capitalism during the depression years of the 1930's. In like manner, nativism and anti-Semitism were pervasive in America during this time and not specific to the Upper Midwest.

It was the League's joining of strong moral convictions with hatred as a kind of creed which made the League's claim to a progressive vision as ambiguous as its entire mode of thought which saw the world in terms of black and white. The League believed that its opposition was corrupt and that its own vision of the future was pure. It believed that a spontaneous arousing of the people could regain control from the corrupt and selfish few who had usurped it. Perhaps, if this belief is willfully applied, one can come to the point where he believes that the power of the enemy and his ability to corrupt are so great that the constitutional institutions are a useless sham and that the people can only effectuate their will by modifying these institutions in form or spirit in such ways as to deny their use by the conspiratorial enemy. "Liberty Bell" Lemke promised the voters in 1936 that (if elected) when Congress convened:

> I will inform them that the Union Party platform, having been endorsed in the election, is the mandate of the people, and therefore must be enacted into law during my term as president. I will insist upon this even if I have to keep Congress is session continuously for four years.[41]

The Nonpartisan Leader and other NPL publications constantly exhorted Leaguers to be wary of the "gang press." Privately-owned newspapers, they felt, often slanted the material that appeared in their columns against economic ideas that differed from the private enterprise system. Hence, the non-League press could not be truthful about the NPL's program. This Baer cartoon appeared in the June 27, 1921, Leader.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

NPL cartoonists occasionally took aim at specific events of interest to farmers on the national level, but did not alter their essential point of view in the process of so doing. Here, Baer illustrates the NPL's conception of who would attend and dominate the 1922 farm conference called by Secretary of Agriculture Henry Cantwell Wallace. This 1922 cartoon revealed that the League's basic vision of American society had not changed to any large extent since 1916.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

The feeling is inescapable that the League at another period of time could have taken a decidedly undemocratic turn.

The virulence behind the politics of the Nonpartisan League was rooted in the belief that diverse human interests are basically irreconcilable. In the League's view of things, "victory" would only be possible once the true producers of the nation's wealth were victorious over the nonproducing manipulators of wealth, the "nonproducers," the "parasites," the mere manipulators of money, represented by the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce. As long as "victory" was defined in this way, it became, from an historical perspective, a snare and a delusion when once achieved in 1919. At the core of a truly progressive and liberal American political tradition is the belief that everybody can somehow adjust their interests within a community, an imperfect community at best, but a community nevertheless, in which all can mutually benefit. Such an adjustment is a never-ending process which must be worked at day by day at a determined, slow, perhaps treadmill pace. The Nonpartisan League's apocalyptic vision of a purified millennium was inherent in its ahistorical and transformationist mode of thought which looked forward to a spontaneous creation of a "new day in North Dakota" free of the devil's handiwork. This is a view not unrelated to the religious visions of the Puritans in the seventeenth century. We, today, who live in a much more complex world than 1915 and 1630, can take little inspiration from such a vision. The future of the United States, of Western Civilization and of the world depends on what kind of outlook will replace this dissolving mode of thought with its tendency to see the world as an eternal struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.

41. William Lemke quoted in *Social Justice*, II (October 19, 1936), 5.

"Puzzle," reads the caption to this February 21, 1921, Nonpartisan Leader cartoon, "Find the Man Interested in Seeing This Argument Kept Up." In part this exemplifies the League's justification for its extremely monolithic organizational structure; the group believed that a centralized power locus minimized the internal disputes that weakened most protest movements.

–State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection