

“Not A Patriotic American Party”: William Howard Taft’s Campaign Against The Nonpartisan League, 1920-1921

by James F. Vivian*

Not everyone applauded President Warren G. Harding’s appointment in June, 1921, of ex-President William Howard Taft as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Two journals, *The Nation* and *Nonpartisan Leader*, numbered among the smattering of critics who found a common objection to the nomination in Taft’s attitude toward the Nonpartisan League (NPL) in North Dakota. In “these rapidly changing times, fraught with momentous issues,” noted *The Nation*, Taft reached the Court having already declared against presidential primaries, initiative and referendum, and the Nonpartisan League. Taft had shown himself a “reactionary” concerning the NPL, observed the *Leader* and had “said and printed more inane things and rot” about it and North Dakota “than almost any prominent politician who might be named.” *The Nation* and the *Leader* both sided with Senator William E. Borah of Idaho, one of four who opposed Taft’s confirmation, in declaring that the Court had acquired an “intellectual indolent” who had not practiced law for a generation, whose principal claim rested on party loyalty, and whose mind had pre-judged too many contemporary questions.¹

The Taft campaign against the NPL began almost one year earlier when the ex-president paid the first of two visits to North Dakota after suffering a devastating defeat in his 1912 bid for re-election. In late 1919, Taft contracted with a leading speaker’s bureau to present a total of eighty “lectures” in the South, West, and Midwest in three stages from March to July, 1920. The bureau’s last itinerary committed him to appearances at Valley City, Minot, Crosby, Cooperstown, Devils Lake, Arvilla (a popular picnic ground near Grand Forks), and Walhalla between June 29 and July 4.² William Jennings Bryan, the grand old man of Chautauqua, preceded him by two weeks in half of the towns under different contract.

Taft traveled by auto from Devils Lake to Grand Forks and Walhalla as a result of abbreviated weekend train schedules, and throughout the tour went without the helpful services of his efficient secretary whose wife had taken ill in the east. At each stopover Taft delivered the same prepared address, one supporting U.S. membership in the League of Nations. The speech harmonized with Taft’s pacifist nature and was in keeping with his role as president of the League to Enforce Peace, which he had helped organize in 1914-1915. The week Taft spent in North Dakota, he later admonished the bureau staff, had meant “a pretty hard trip” as a result of overly ambitious advance arrangements. Certainly he hoped for improved roads and highways before making another visit, according to one comment overheard at a whistle stop.³

The tour coincided with the June 30 primary elections and provided Taft with opportunities to confer privately with staunch Republicans and leaders of the Independent Voters Association (IVA) attempting to reverse the preponderant legislative majority the League had gained in the 1918 elections. In Valley City, for example, Taft’s mid-afternoon presentation on June 29 drew a good attendance despite recent rains and muddy roads.⁴ That evening Professor George A. McFarland, past president of Valley City Normal School, brought Taft home for supper and reportedly several hours of discussion about “affairs of the nation, local and otherwise.” The guest list of ten included Congressman George M. Young, state senator Frank E. Ployhar, former Governor Frank White, former mayor I.J. Moe, Dr. E.A. Pray, and *Times-Record* editor Percy R. Trubshaw. McFarland’s wife and two

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¹ *The Nation*, 113 (July 13, 1921), p. 32; *Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, N.D.), July 25, 1921, p. 2.

² W.W. Mischler to O.B. Stephenson, Emerson Lyceum Bureau, Chicago, June 19, 1920, and O.B. Stephenson to Taft, July 7, 1920, William Howard Taft Papers (Washington, D.C., Library of Congress), Reel 219; *Grand Forks Herald*, July 7, 1920, p. 3.

³ Ruhl Bartlett, *The League to Enforce Peace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944); Sondra R. Herman, *Eleven Against War: Studies in American Internationalist Thought, 1898-1921* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1969), pp. 57-59; Taft to Mischler, July 9, 1920, Taft Papers, Reel 219.

⁴ *Daily Times-Record* (Valley City, N.D.), June 30, 1920, p. 2.

daughters, the only ladies present, functioned as waitresses and thus guaranteed the “stag” atmosphere of the evening. In view of subsequent events, another significant discussion topic was McFarland’s unsuccessful battle with the NPL-controlled Board of Regents in 1918 to retain the presidency of the Normal School.⁵

A third conversational subject almost certainly involved Frank White. Colonel White, lately returned from World War I battlefields, had withdrawn his “soldier’s” candidacy for the U.S. Senate on June 9 — too late for elimination from the ballot. The 5,400 votes cast for him may have accorded League nominee Edwin F. Ladd the advantage over incumbent Republican Senator Asle J. Gronna, whose political career came to a sudden end.⁶



William Howard Taft (1857-1930) was President of the United States from 1909-1913 and Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court from 1921-1930. The photo was taken about 1920.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

Taft appeared in Minot on June 30 under the auspices of the Association of Commerce. His short and sometimes repetitious presentation on “Americanism” at an evening banquet attended by 140 business and professional persons defended the Constitution and dismissed Russian socialism as

⁵ *Ibid.*; McFarland’s experience at the Normal School is told in Glenn A. Hanna, “History of Valley City State Teachers College” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1951), pp. 67-70, and in David L. Hennessey, “History of Valley City State College, 1890-1970” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1971), pp. 34-39.

⁶ Alfred C. Melby, “A Chemist in the Senate: Edwin F. Ladd, 1921-1925” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1967), pp. 23-24.

⁷ *Minot Daily News*, June 30, 1920, p. 1; July 1, 1920, p. 4.

⁸ *The Divide County Journal* (Crosby), June 2, 1920, p. 1, and *Griggs County Sentinel-Courier* (Cooperstown), July 8, 1920, p. 1.

⁹ *Devils Lake Journal*, July 3, 1920, p. 1; *Grand Forks Herald*, July 4, 1920, pp. 2, 11, and July 5, 1920, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia, Pa.), July 1, 1920, p. 10; Stephen Hess, “Big Bill Taft,” *American Heritage*, XVII (October, 1966), p. 84. Taft’s column regularly appeared in such other newspapers as the *Minneapolis Tribune*, *New York Herald*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*.

¹¹ *Public Ledger*, July 1, 1920, p. 10.

an “exploded” doctrine that had shackled the population to the worst military tyranny the world had yet known.⁷ The balance of the tour proved more hurried. Delayed connections or long distances between stops made Taft more dependent upon others’ ability to taxi him to his next engagement. In addition, the rich detail in local press reporting paled at later points, despite the fact that Taft attracted notable crowds. The slow election count and the close contests in some races dominated the news, and the NPL-controlled press ignored Taft’s tour with the exception of a *Nonpartisan Leader* rebuttal to Taft’s printed commentary.⁸

Anson B. Jackson, a classmate of Taft’s at Yale University law school, drove Taft from Devils Lake to Niagara after a speech on July 3. There a “delegation” of Grand Forks businessmen, including Jeremiah D. Bacon, publisher of the *Grand Forks Herald* and a man of strong anti-NPL political convictions, met them to convey Taft to Arvilla for an evening Independence Day rally. Taft addressed an audience of perhaps 5,000 at Fadden’s Grove, a natural amphitheater, beginning an hour later than advertised. Bacon then took Taft to Grand Forks for the night and apparently drove him to Walhalla the following Sunday morning.

The audience there, reportedly exceeding 10,000, might have numbered more except that Canadian notices misreported the scheduled hour. At Pembina in the late afternoon after yet another auto trip, Taft caught the train to Winnipeg and thence to his summer home on Murray Island, Quebec. The Commercial Clubs of both Devils Lake and Grand Forks provided or arranged for the modest amenities en route. Presumably most serious discussions took place during the long drives between destinations.⁹

Meantime, on July 1, the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* published “North Dakota’s Fight Against the Townleyites.” This was the latest of Taft’s contributions to his weekly series of nationally syndicated editorial essays. The series, which supplemented his income while he served as Kent Professor of Law at Yale University, had begun in 1918 and ranged across the spectrum of timely issues and topics. Taft probably composed on the night of June 29 after returning to his hotel in Valley City and telegraphed it to the *Ledger*’s regional office in Chicago the next day. The copyrighted account, the first of three devoted to North Dakota politics in general and the NPL in particular, denounced the League as “socialist, unpatriotic, anti-American, despotic, and dishonest in its methods.” Taft declared that “the great body of [NPL] supporters,” chiefly farmers, acted on “blind prejudice and ignorance.” Primary election returns had yet to be tallied, but Taft confidently predicted the League’s demise both for the good of the state and the nation. The League’s intent, partly aided and abetted by imported radicals, was “to create a Socialistic government.”¹⁰

Already, Taft explained,¹¹ the NPL had taken control of the school and taxation systems, supreme court, several commissions, and a “very large number of the papers” — all in a manner suggestive, he said, of Russian bolsheviks Lenin and Trotsky. Taft therefore hoped for the triumph of William Langer over League incumbent Governor Lynn J. Frazier.

Further, he hoped for expansion of the IVA in the cause of stemming the flight of capital from the state, restoring public credit, and moderating the tax burden necessitated by the "creation of commissions and offices filled with nonresident radicals at high salaries." Indeed, Taft hesitated on just one point: whether to sanction the re-election of Republican Senator Gronna or to stand mute, thereby indicating publicly his neutrality toward the League's nominee, Ladd, "a political professor."

Perceiving correctly the political bias in Taft's probable sources and the evident hastiness of his composition, editor Oliver S. Morris of the *Nonpartisan Leader* wisely chose not to compete at the same level of intemperance. Instead, Morris seized upon a recent editorial from the New York *Evening Post* also critical of NPL President Arthur C. Townley and "Townleyism." Even so, the *Post* found Taft's aspersions

George A. McFarland (1858-1938) became President of Valley City Normal School in 1892. His removal in 1918 resulted in a bitter struggle with the Nonpartisan League state administration.

—Courtesy James F. Vivian



against NPL supporters "reckless" because they emanated from a personage of his rank and his charges of un-Americanism "unjustified." In sum, according to the *Post*, Taft's caustic condemnation of the NPL sounded too simply of "too many harsh eastern critics of the League."¹²

By then, the *Ledger* had printed Taft's second editorial assault, entitled "Fusion in North Dakota to Defeat the League."¹³ It reported the indefinite results of the June 30 primary in the stated expectation that the League's appeal and strength had stabilized and perhaps begun to wane. North Dakota farmers, in Taft's view, were re-assessing their lot while union labor in urban districts had rallied to the League. The League might not be as socialistically inclined as previously thought, Taft allowed, but the notion that agrarians and organized labor could merge interests and goals had to be regarded as an "unnatural" partnership that "cannot abide." The anti-League forces, especially the IVA, had yet to demonstrate ability to fuse the opposition regardless of party affiliation and despite the national presidential campaign. Yet,

according to Taft, the League's defeat was absolutely "necessary to the prosperity of the state" and the "primary consideration for all but the Leaguers." Taft endorsed anti-League Republicans and Democrats combining against the NPL. Investors had been frightened:

Loans cannot be secured by North Dakota business men. . . on reasonable terms and county warrants are selling at a heavy discount. The state banking business is conducted in the dark. The state auditor is forbidden by the governor and the [state] Supreme Court to examine the state bank. . . And the people do not know what its funds are and what they are being used for.

North Dakota desperately needed an airing of its finances, Taft argued, referring directly to the Scandinavian-American bank in Fargo. The publicity would doubtless "disclose transactions not reflecting credit on the League management. . . and not inuring to the financial credit" of the state. Much depended on the November, 1920, general elections. If favorable for the IVA, the NPL programs could be "seriously blocked" and investigations mounted to hasten the League's "downfall."¹⁴

The chairman of the Republican National Committee asked William Lemke, secretary of the state Central Committee and NPL nominee for Attorney General, to respond specifically to the charges and allegations in the editorial. Lemke categorically dismissed them all, insisting that the NPL fit squarely within the progressive aspect of Lincoln's legacy, that Taft's views concealed woefully outdated precepts, and that Taft possessed no special right to judge party credentials.¹⁵ A projected private conference between Lemke and three representatives from national headquarters never occurred; however, spokesmen for Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio, Republican nominee for president, cleverly gave Lemke the impression that they accepted the League's profession of loyalty in exchange for NPL endorsement of party leadership. The exchange cost the Harding people nothing in patronage commitments.¹⁶

In an editorial rebuttal, the *Nonpartisan Leader* appreciated the lowered stridency in Taft's tone, yet rejected his interpretation of the primary results as either "unintelligent" or "ill-informed" and scored his casual respect for fact. It was simply not true, as Taft claimed, that union labor had heretofore not been sympathetic to the NPL, that the NPL aimed at socializing farm-land, and that property tax assessments in North Dakota were among the highest in the country.¹⁷

Taft rested his pen while awaiting the results of the pending elections, except to write an occasional private letter bolstering the anti-NPL forces or denouncing what he termed the League's "vicious use of the general primary. . . to get control

¹² *Nonpartisan Leader*, July 26, 1920, p. 1.

¹³ *Public Ledger*, July 19, 1920, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* The Scandinavian-American Bank had been the subject of a major financial scandal involving NPL officials in 1919.

¹⁵ William Lemke to Gutzon Borglum, August 20, 1920, William Lemke Papers (Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks), Box 3.

¹⁶ Edward C. Blackorby, "Prairie Rebel: The Public Career of William Lemke" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Dakota, 1958), pp. 272-282.

¹⁷ *Nonpartisan Leader*, August 23, 1920, p. 2.

of both parties.” He continued to believe the NPL “unfair and fraudulent, and their doctrines. . . impossible.” As of mid-October, he had decided that among senatorial candidates neither Gronna nor Ladd suited his preference, but that Ladd, whom Taft may have met while visiting Crosby, was the more acceptable. Gronna had grown too close to Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette.¹⁸

The Harding group feigned satisfaction. The candidate’s principal campaign statement on farm policy, delivered at the Minnesota State Fair in St. Paul on September 8, spoke approvingly of agricultural cooperatives, anti-tenancy measures, and long-term credits. He mentioned the NPL not at all, but talked ambiguously of farmers needing “actual and practical” representation and less “beguilement in cultivating a quadrennial crop of votes,” while deprecating “class consciousness” and “governmental paternalism.” The Republican command clearly did not intend to agitate any latent disagreements prior to the election.¹⁹

When the November election results, disappointing for the League, had been tabulated, Taft congratulated Rome G. Brown, editor of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, on having helped rescue the North Dakota legislature from the NPL “in the place of its nativity.” He viewed the returns as evidence that “the American people are sound and sanely conservative and have very little use for socialistic or Non-partisan League principles.”²⁰ He responded eagerly to another invitation, extended at the behest of the Fargo Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, to visit there in early December during another shortened lecture swing through the Midwest.²¹

The speech Taft delivered before an audience of about 400 at the Fargo College auditorium on December 2 dealt again with the question of U.S. membership in the League of Nations.²² He planned to repeat the same speech at colleges in Aberdeen and Mitchell, South Dakota, on two successive days, according to his prepared itinerary. But a “conversation” with J.E. Rockwell, editor of the *Fargo Forum*, and supper with college President E. Lee Howard and “some friends” changed his mind. At both South Dakota appearances Taft utilized the opportunity to present slightly different versions of a third attack on the NPL, which the *Public Ledger* published on December 13.²³

Taft’s third and last editorial, the longest of the trio, analyzed the results of the November election from the premise

¹⁸ Taft to Judge I.J. Moe, Valley City, October 17, 1920, and Taft to Newcomb Cleveland, October 20, 1920, Taft Papers, Reels 560 and 561 respectively.

¹⁹ Harding’s speech is reproduced in its entirety in *Fargo Forum*, September 15, 1920, p. 8; Blackorby, “Prairie Rebel,” pp. 272-282; Randolph C. Downes, *The Rise of Warren Gamaliel Harding, 1865-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970), pp. 519-520.

²⁰ Taft to Rome Brown, November 8, 1920, and Taft to Mrs. William Hooper, November 8, 1920, Taft Papers, Reel 561.

²¹ John C. Pollock to Taft, November 20, 1920, Taft Papers, Reel 222; Taft to Pollock, November 21, 1920, and Taft to E. Lee Howard, November 21, 1920, *ibid.*, Reel 561.

²² *Fargo Forum*, December 3, 1920, p. 1.

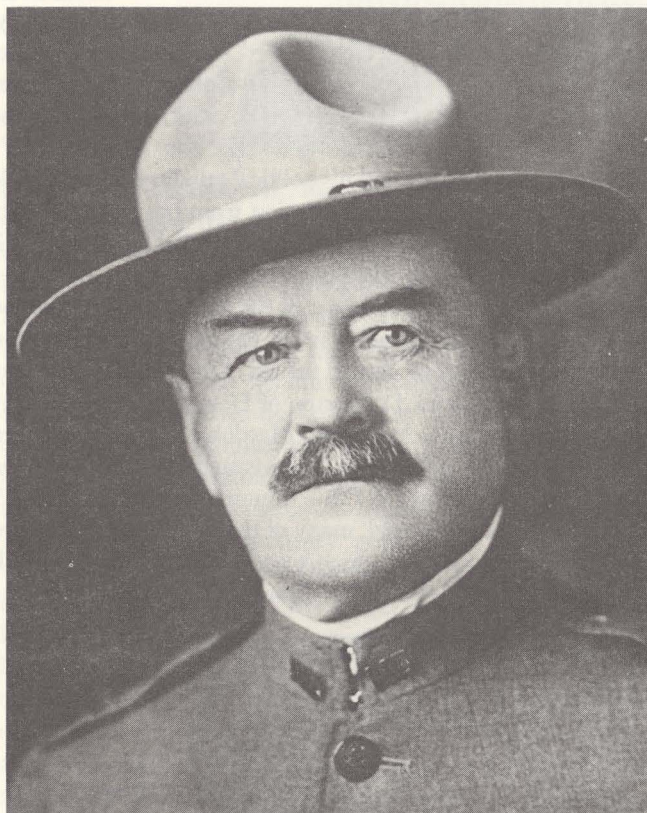
²³ W.W. Mischler to H.W. Foght, November 22, 1920, and to Guy Brown, November 29, 1920, Taft Papers, Reel 561; Taft to John C. Pollock, November 29, 1920, *ibid.*, Reel 561; J.E. Rockwell to Taft, December 4, 1920, *ibid.*, Reel 639; *Public Ledger*, December 13, 1920, p. 8.

²⁴ *Public Ledger*, December 13, 1920, p. 8; Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 347-348.

²⁵ *Public Ledger*, December 13, 1920, p. 8.

that North Dakota politics and “Russian affairs” vied at the same level of “general interest.” He noted that the NPL had lost its legislative majority, and that Governor Frazier had been re-elected by a narrow plurality, which he attributed to the Harding-Republican landslide nationally. He continued to deplore NPL control of much Republican party machinery, but took heart at the adoption of five initiated and referred measures that armed anti-League forces with power capable of forcing overdue investigations and public disclosures. “For once, at least,” Taft sighed contentedly, “this method of making laws had proved useful.”²⁴

He then detailed the nature of the five measures, including the complaint that sparked each one and the remedy sought. Otherwise he uttered a kind word for J.F.T. O’Connor, Frazier’s losing Democratic and IVA-backed challenger; he



Colonel Frank White (1856-1940) headed the North Dakota militia. A former Governor (1901-1905) and the state’s best-known soldier, White served as U.S. Treasurer from 1921-1928.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

again congratulated Langer on his defection from the League; and he proclaimed NPL power “greatly impaired” in its home base, with small prospect for recovery. The IVA had not desired a decisive victory, he intimated, lest the League escape responsibility for the “hard times” at hand. Turning to Ladd, whose resounding victory and expertise in agriculture he acknowledged, Taft bluntly expected him “to act more fully with the Republican party” upon entering the Senate. He anticipated that Ladd would prove “no more radical” than Gronna and less of “an obstructionist” than La Follette.²⁵

Taft might have prudently concluded his comments there. Unfortunately, he ventured a summary of matters he poorly understood. He linked the contest for the state superintendency of public instruction in 1918 with the state library scandal of 1919 — that is, he confused former Superintendent Neil C. Macdonald with library consultant Charles E. Stangeland:

The league had put in at the head of the schools a man who abused his power by introducing as a textbook and as propaganda some very pernicious doctrine with reference to the family, and he was finally beaten for the place by a woman [Minnie J. Nielson] who had attacked his course. The league triumverate thereupon took away the power of this newly elected head of the schools. This law [one of the five referred measures] restores all the old powers to her.²⁶

Taft's sometimes careless attention to fact now caught up with him and briefly threatened a libel suit. He had corrected in the second editorial an earlier snide reference to Ladd as a "political professor," identifying him properly, if still inaccurately, as president of the "state university" rather than the North Dakota Agricultural College.²⁷ In the latest gaffe, however, Taft blundered with fault, prompting the *Leader* to draw an unflattering comparison between Taft's single-term presidency and his political punditry.²⁸ Macdonald learned about the misrepresentation from one of the faculty at Harvard University where he had enrolled to complete his post-graduate training. Macdonald wrote Morris at the *Leader* and John Andrews, past editor of the *North Dakota Leader*, pleading their intercession on his behalf. Morris contacted Taft directly; Andrews elicited the aid of three-term Republican Congressman Patrick D. Norton of Devils Lake. Admittedly lacking the money to bring suit, Macdonald wavered between forbearance and indignation, but insisted his reputation and career would be ruined if Taft's calumny was not rescinded.²⁹

Other letters followed, many of them voluntarily directed to Taft from Macdonald's friends and colleagues in and outside the state. Toward the end of January Taft rightly sensed a

serious error. On January 31, 1921, he mailed identical queries to nine editors and educators in North Dakota, asking all to comment on the gravity of his misstatement in the *Ledger*.³⁰ All save McFarland, now superintendent of Williston Public Schools, advised Taft to apologize. McFarland, still embittered toward the NPL, refused to recognize Macdonald in any capacity other than as a League spokesman, and counseled against a formal retraction because the League might claim an editorial advantage.³¹

On February 9, Taft wrote Macdonald an apology, enclosing a draft of the statement he planned for publication, and soon explained himself to Harvard's president, a personal friend.³² The retraction that appeared in the February 15 edition of the *Public Ledger*, although not entirely to Macdonald's liking, was complete. Morris honored the "fair and manly spirit" Taft exhibited in "righting this wrong," but again cast doubt on Taft's sources. A legislative commission had just exonerated the library of shelving "pernicious" literature among its holdings.³³

A contemplated fourth editorial on North Dakota affairs never materialized. From Grand Forks, Bacon invited Taft, on behalf of the IVA's Committee of 21, for yet another visit to the state in order to advance the recall action viewed as the next, most direct challenge to NPL leadership. Taft, although friendly to the idea, had become immersed in other activities, including especially enhancing his availability for the chief justiceship and counseling the president on prospective judicial appointments. "When you are ready to get your artillery unlimbered for next fall," he wrote Bacon encouragingly, "write me and I shall see what I can do to help out in your campaign."³⁴

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, July 19, 1920, p. 8.

²⁸ *Nonpartisan Leader*, January 10, 1921, p. 4.

²⁹ Oliver S. Morris to Taft, January 22, 1921, and P.D. Norton to Taft, February 1, 1921, Taft Papers, Reel 223; Macdonald to Kathrine Macdonald, December 5, 1920, N.C. Macdonald Papers (Orin G. Libby Collection, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks), Box 1, Miscellaneous Correspondence; D.C. Macdonald Papers (Orin G. Libby Collection, University of North Dakota), Box 8, folder 2.

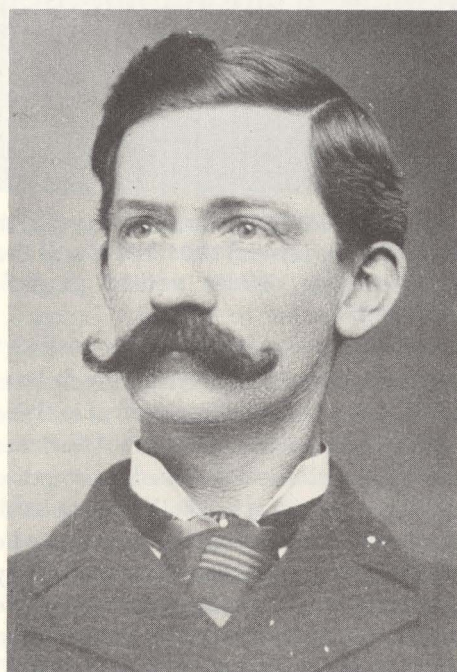
³⁰ The letters, some of them enclosing a clipping of the offending editorial, were addressed to W.P. Davies, editor of the *Grand Forks Herald*; Anson Jackson, Devils Lake; Judge I.J. Moe, Valley City; George A. McFarland; Helen M. Crane, Valley City State Normal School; Oliver S. Morris; J.E. Rockwell, editor of the *Fargo Forum*; Willis J. Bell, Dickinson State Normal School; and Candis Nelson, San Francisco State Normal School, California. Taft Papers, January 31, 1921, Reel 223.

³¹ McFarland thought Macdonald "boorish," "arrogant" and, although not one of the "free-love group," sympathetic to it and NPL socialism. He feared Macdonald would succeed to the presidency of the Agriculture College upon Ladd's departure for the Senate. McFarland to Taft, February 9 and 17, 1921, Taft Papers, Reel 223 and 224. *Herald* editor Davies believed an apology due, but in the "mildest possible manner." Davies to Taft, February 5, 1921, Taft Papers, Reel 223.

³² Taft to Macdonald, February 9, 1921, Taft Papers, Reel 223; Taft to A. Lawrence Lowell, February 12, 1921, *ibid.*, Reel 562; *Public Ledger*, February 15, 1921, p. 8.

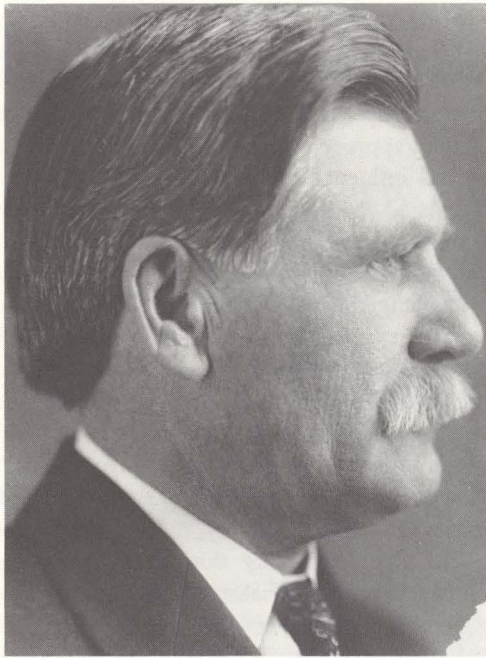
³³ Morris to Taft, February 23, 1921, Taft Papers, Reel 224; Larry Remele, "The North Dakota State Library Scandal of 1919," *North Dakota History*, 44-1 (Winter, 1977), pp. 21-29. Morris believed that William Langer figured among Taft's leading sources.

³⁴ Taft to J.J. Spurgeon, February 24, 1921, Taft Papers, Reel 561; J.D. Bacon to Taft, April 2 and 12, 1921, *ibid.*, Reel 225; Taft to Bacon, April 16 and 19, 1921, *ibid.*, Reel 225; Alpheus T. Mason, *William Howard Taft: Chief Justice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), chap. 3.



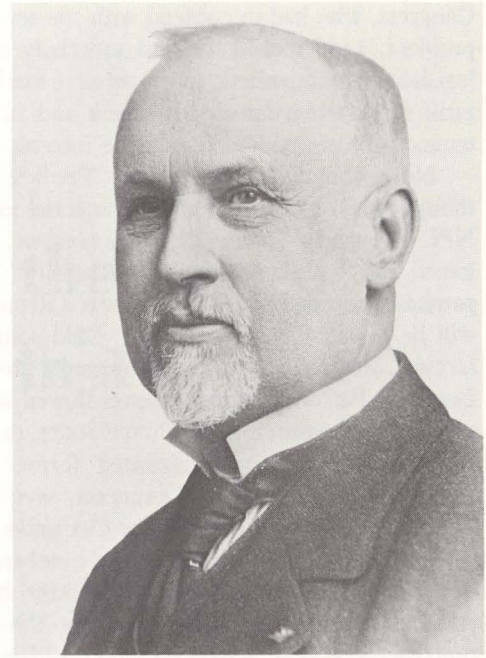
Jeremiah D. Bacon (1865-1933)
published the *Grand Forks Herald*; he bitterly opposed the NPL.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection



Incumbent Asle J. Gronna (left) confronted NPL-endorsed Edwin F. Ladd in the 1920 Republican senatorial primary election. Both men were progressives. As a result, neither was really acceptable to conservatives such as Taft.

—State Historical Society
of North Dakota Collection



An opportunity presented itself early. On April 30 Taft delivered the first James Stokes Foundation Lecture on Politics at the new Town Hall of New York University. In several ways the address, entitled "Representative Government in the United States," qualified as Taft's valedictory on current affairs prior to his elevation to the Supreme Court starting in July, 1921. The thesis developed in the forty-two page typescript was simply that general respect for representative government, long the prideful conviction of Americans, had eroded under the pressure of a growing expectation that political equality must also produce economic and social equality. The evidence cited included heightened labor and class strife, mischievous applications of the principle of direct democracy, and mounting socialist and anarchist influence.³⁵

The NPL provided a case in point:

There has also been a combination of farmers, called the Nonpartisan League, originating in North Dakota, and spreading to neighboring states. That is not a patriotic American party. It has been made possible by the insistence of a number of unsuccessful and in many instances of foreign-born farmers in North Dakota, who were aroused by real grievance, as to grain classification and rates, and who conceived the idea that through a political combination they exclude every other class and every other interest and run the State for the farmers alone. They adopted state socialism and proceeded to do state banking, the state warehousing, and performing all the other functions essential to the marketing of their crops by the state agencies.³⁶

Barely two months later the Senate, in executive session, quickly and easily confirmed Taft's nomination to the Supreme Court. Taft proved an immensely popular choice;³⁷ even those

critical of the appointment, like *The Nation* and the *Leader*, openly conceded that point. Indeed, the *Leader* obliquely expressed its gratitude for small favors by admitting the decision could have been "worse," given the elements responsible for Harding's election. Both journals recognized nonetheless that the Court's liberal minority had not been augmented.³⁸ Nor did Taft cease entirely his interest in undermining the NPL. Responding to another Bacon request in March, 1923, this one asking help in enlisting President Harding's personal involvement, Taft noncommittally indicated he would promote the idea that North Dakota "is a good place to stop and a good place to have missionary work count."³⁹

Newly elected Senator Ladd was not to be co-opted. In the *New York World* and elsewhere, including especially his lengthy maiden speech on Senate floor in May, Ladd defended his constituency.⁴⁰ American farmers, representing more than one-third of the population, figured as "the largest single employer of labor" and had "more real wealth invested than all the railroads, mines, and manufacturers combined." Ladd rejected outright the effort to define Republican orthodoxy and to read the "farmers of the Central West . . . out of the Republican party by a few spokesmen or self-selected leaders." The farmers of North Dakota were neither "free lovers, bolsheviks, nor socialists," but rather seventy percent Republican and "organized without regard to party lines for the purpose of trying to throw off the oppressive yoke . . . put on them by a system devised by a privileged few."

In Ladd's estimate, Taft had "during the past year gone out of his way repeatedly to cast reflections upon . . . the Nonpartisan League, as well as upon the speaker;" Ladd asserted that Taft knew little and cared less about farmers and their plight, seemed wholly insensitive to the gouging that farmers suffered at the hands of "eastern corporate and banking interests," and parroted the views of "his shortsighted political and banking advisors." Taft did not speak for farmers, Ladd said, and he hoped that went as well for members of

³⁵ *Public Ledger*, May 1, 1921, p. 6; typeset copy of speech in Taft Papers, undated, Reel 592.

³⁶ Quoted in *The Nation*, 113 (July 13, 1921). 32.

³⁷ See editorial consensus in *Literary Digest*, 70 (July 16, 1921), p. 13.

³⁸ *Nonpartisan Leader*, July 25, 1921, p. 2.

³⁹ Bacon-Taft exchange, May 22 and 26, 1923, Taft Papers, Reel 252.

⁴⁰ U.S., *Congressional Record*, 67th Cong., 1st Sess., 1921, Vol. 61, Pt. 1, pp. 917-922; Melby, "A Chemist in the Senate," p. 29.

Congress, who had to contend with the severity of the farm problem. Ladd looked forward especially to "constructive legislation" sympathetic to cooperative marketing, favorable tariff rates, extension of land bank and rural credits, anti-tenancy measures, and reasonable interest rates.⁴¹

No accommodation resulted. Predictably, the *Leader* thought Ladd's historical and commercial justification of the NPL "masterly" while *The Independent*, the IVA organ, joined Taft in declaring the NPL devoid of "any distinctively patriotic purpose." Ladd "never was a Republican and never will be," said the *Fargo Forum*; Ladd sought to represent farmers, not political parties, countered the *North Dakota Leader*.⁴² Patronage appointments flowed accordingly. The position of Treasurer of the United States, to which President Woodrow Wilson had appointed former North Dakota governor John Burke, a Democrat, went to anti-League Republican Frank White of Valley City under Harding. White remained at the post, despite an early embarrassment related to the sale of NPL-sponsored state bonds, until his voluntary resignation in April, 1928, to accept the presidency of a mortgage corporation in Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁴³

**J.F.T.
O'Connor
(1883-1949), a
Grand Forks
Democrat,
won Taft's
aid in the
1920
Governor's
race in North
Dakota.**

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Among the nation's established political leaders, Taft alone sought to define the place of the Nonpartisan League in the scheme of affairs. Theodore Roosevelt died in January, 1919, after having grown acidly disillusioned with the League's opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I.⁴⁴ Woodrow Wilson never recovered from a series of strokes in September, 1919, and found himself unable to stem the drift in his administration through the balance of his presidency. William Jennings Bryan, the aging champion of agrarianism, and Senator La Follette, titular head of the moribund Progressive Party, both chose a benign neutrality. Taft, then, presumed to pose as an arbiter in national politics and to carry Roosevelt's censure and suspicions to their logical conclusion.

Taft intervened against the NPL at a tactically opportune moment. The NPL's appeal had reached its zenith, its rapid success had sparked a local reaction, charges of association with the Russian Revolution had tainted its program, and the Republican party was practically guaranteed a convincing

victory in the 1920 general elections if unity could be maintained. The people of North Dakota and elsewhere might perceive and accept the NPL as a legitimate vehicle for their aspirations and even support it as an instrument of their interests. Taft did not approve of it, but recognized the limits of his authority and influence in local matters.

As the NPL related to the national structure, however, Taft could, and did, "read it out of the Republican party." Indeed, he ranged himself in utter opposition to it, not in the least because it challenged his conception of Constitutional order and violated the two-party tradition. As well, the NPL subscribed to several novel ideas generated by the progressive revolt, including popular initiative, public referendum, and citizen recall — all of which Taft had decided by 1913 contravened the purpose and responsibility of government.⁴⁵

More privately, Taft condemned NPL "tyranny, blindness and monstrous economic stupidity." He believed the League a revival of Populism, only this time threatening a "dangerous" union with the Socialist "labor faction," the I.W.W. The League's unequivocal collapse would also provide "a most useful lesson" to other states.⁴⁶

Taft represented the resurgent conservative center of the Republican party. However clumsy some of his methods and mistaken some of his arguments, he better fathomed the temper of the time and capitalized on the advantage. The Nonpartisan League might persist in the illusion that it held lease to a room in the left wing of the Republican mansion, but the management, largely at Taft's urging, pronounced it invalid. In endorsing the IVA and advising fusion of loyal Republicans and Democrats, Taft classified the NPL a third party destined to pursue an independent existence. The IVA proceeded to turn one of the NPL's signal reforms, the recall provision, against its authors in 1921. Victorious, the IVA witnessed the demise of the NPL in its original form and organization within a year. And in 1924, when both of North Dakota's NPL-backed senators supported the Progressive party's nomination of La Follette for the presidency, the Republican party cancelled their membership and the Republican-controlled Senate denied them their seniority.⁴⁷

⁴¹ *Congressional Record*, Vol. 61, Pt. 1, pp. 917-922.

⁴² *Nonpartisan Leader*, May 16, 1921, p. 1; *The Independent* (Fargo, N.D.), May 26, 1921, p. 3; *Fargo Forum*, May 5, 1921, p. 4; *North Dakota Leader* (Fargo), May 21, 1921, p. 4.

⁴³ U.S., *Congressional Record*, 67th Cong., 1st Sess., Vol. 61, Pt. 1, p. 326; *New York Times*, May 25, 1921, p. 25; April 10, 1928, p. 36.

⁴⁴ Robert P. Wilkins, "Theodore Roosevelt and 'Dacotah': A Mutual Disillusionment," *North Dakota Quarterly*, 26 (Spring, 1958), pp. 62-63; Robert P. Wilkins and Wynona H. Wilkins, *North Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), pp. 147-148.

⁴⁵ William Howard Taft, *Popular Government: Its Essence, Its Permanence and Its Perils* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1913), chaps. 3 and 4.

⁴⁶ Taft to Ernest W. Young, May 8, 1921, Taft Papers, Reel 562; Taft to Rome Brown, February 16, 1920, *ibid.*, Reel 559; Taft to Horace Taft, February 24, 1921, *ibid.*, Reel 561.

⁴⁷ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, pp. 350-351; Larry Remele, "Power to the People: The Nonpartisan League," and D. Jerome Tweton, "The Anti-League Movement: The IVA," both in Thomas W. Howard, ed., *The North Dakota Political Tradition* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), pp. 88-90, 118-122.



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