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Historical Musings

Defining Moments in Twentieth-century South Dakota Political History

History, they say, is written by the winners. Written history almost always takes the past as given, attempting to describe it as accurately as possible and then advancing plausible explanations for why things turned out the way they did. Much less common is the practice of asking "What if?" That is, what if circumstances had been different—if, for instance, the arrow or the cannonball had landed a foot or a meter to the right, or if the baseball had hit the ground an inch to the left? Or what if a would-be assassin had managed to kill president-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt in February 1933 instead of Chicago's mayor, who was sitting next to him in the car? Or what if bad weather had aborted the D-Day invasion on 6 June 1944? The outcomes would have been different in every case, and our explanatory syntheses would have to be reconfigured.

A growing fascination with alternate or alternative history has begun to bear fruit with the publication of increasing numbers of volumes on how history might have happened differently. Fiction writers seem attracted to imagining alternate outcomes for historical episodes. Prominent examples include best-selling novelists such as Philip Roth, whose *The Plot against America* postulates an improbable victory by Charles Lindbergh in the 1940 presidential race, and Stephen King, whose *11/22/63* imagines life after 22 November 1963 with a fully alive John F. Kennedy in the White House.[1]

Historians have demonstrated a limited willingness to engage in such

1. Roth, *The Plot against America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); King, *11/22/63* (New York: Scribner, 2011). For a journalist's effort, *see* Jeff Greenfield, *Then Everything Changed: Stunning Alternate Histories of American Politics: JFK, RFK, Carter, Ford, Reagan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2011).

speculation. The term "allohistory" (literally, "other history") has yet to catch on widely, but the phenomenon it denotes promises to grow larger in the future.[2] Military historians, especially, have been drawn to "what if" questions. Economic historians also have perceived a useful intellectual tool in counterfactual theorizing. Robert W. Fogel famously estimated the impact that a delay in building the transcontinental railroads might have had upon American economic growth after the Civil War.[3] While "hard scientists," especially those like Albert Einstein in the realm of physics, have clearly demonstrated the value of "thought experiments" and mental games in their pursuit of reality, historians have only begun to exploit the potential of counterfactual thinking.

Political history is an area where alternative or counterfactual history could be used to greater advantage, especially in analyzing cause-and-effect relationships. In fact, while a great deal of political analysis and historical interpretation utilizes alternate scenarios implicitly, more explicit use of the method would realize considerable benefits. History, I would argue, is more a matter of probabilities and possibilities, more a confluence of hard-to-predict (and understand) forces and vectors than an expression of certainty or inevitability. It depends heavily upon human actions and failures to act, rational and irrational behavior, conscious and subconscious thought, intended results and unintended consequences, and colliding patterns and sequences, as well as fuzzy interactions and nebulous influences. There *are* regularities and patterns discernable in the past, so long as its interpreters retain their humility in entertaining them and are willing to modify their

2. *See,* for example, Robert Cowley, ed., *The Collected What If? Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2001); Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

3. On military history, *see,* for example, James C. Bresnahan, ed., *Revisioning the Civil War: Historians on Counterfactual Scenarios* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006); Eric G. Swedin, *When Angels Wept: A What-If History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2010); and Peter G. Tsouras, *Rising Sun Victorious: The Alternate History of How the Japanese Won the Pacific War* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001). On railroad building, *see* Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964).

thinking upon uncovering new evidence. Much history, however, can be understood only in light of chance and unpredictable outcomes.[4]

Among the most revealing regularities of South Dakota political history is what I like to refer to as the "40-percent rule"—a generalization that, by the way, is not unique to the state. This "rule" arises from the observation that whichever party wins elections or exercises political power, the opposition generally manages to garner at least 40 percent of the vote. Because South Dakota has regularly been one of the most heavily Republican states in the Union, the 40-percent rule has probably been violated more frequently here than elsewhere. Yet, a quick glance at election returns from 1889 to the present confirms that Democrats usually manage to capture at least two-fifths of the electorate in their contests with Republicans. In any particular instance, therefore, a switch of only one vote in five would convert a landslide victory for the dominant party into a similar landslide for the opposition. The fact is, however long-term the dominance of the Republicans has been in South Dakota, politics has usually been seriously contested—a dialectic between the two major parties, which, in turn, factor a wide variety of political views, interests, goals, and demands into a continuing debate over how the state should be run.[5]

Rather than trying to provide a comprehensive overview of state politics over the course of approximately a century, which would be impossible to do in any case in the space available here, I propose to identify eleven major turning points in South Dakota's political saga—moments in which decisions were made (or failed to be made)

4. On chance and uncertainty in history, *see* Clayton Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 55–56; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 56, 64; and W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 37–42.

5. For general surveys of South Dakota political history in the twentieth century, *see* Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004); Alan L. Clem, *Prairie State Politics: Popular Democracy in South Dakota* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967); Clem, *Government by the People? South Dakota Politics in the Last Third of the Twentieth Century* (Rapid City, S.Dak.: Chiesman Foundation for Democracy, 2002); and John E. Miller, "Politics since Statehood," in *A New South Dakota History,* 2d ed., ed. Harry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 2009), pp. 194–224.

that have had large and continuing impacts upon the body politic. At points like these, the curious could legitimately ask, "What if . . . ?" For example, "What if after 1916 Governor Peter Norbeck had decided that convergent interests and goals connected his own progressive Republicanism with the invading Nonpartisan League (NPL) from North Dakota and therefore dictated an alliance with the group rather than attempts to smother it?" Or, "What if during the 1930s the state's Democratic leadership had been more liberal, united, and purposeful; had joined into an alliance with the New Deal; and had succeeded in effecting a long-term political realignment, which, in fact, did occur in a number of surrounding states?" Again, we could ask, "What if senators Francis H. Case and Karl E. Mundt had failed in their effort to reroute Interstate 29 through eastern South Dakota rather than western Minnesota?" And, "What if, as a teen, William J. Janklow had continued growing up in Illinois rather than moving to South Dakota?" If any of these scenarios had come to pass, South Dakota would still, no doubt, be more heavily rural, agricultural, conservative, and traditional than most other states, but the look and feel of it, the experiences and opportunities of its residents, and the place of South Dakota in the nation would be measurably different.

The episodes and developments discussed here represent a first take on important turning points in South Dakota's political history and, by suggesting other possible scenarios in some cases, put forward an alternative narrative of the subject. They are the rise of progressivism under Coe I. Crawford and Peter Norbeck; the suppression of NPL recruiting in the state; the enactment and later financial debacle of the rural-credits loan program; the election of a conservative Democrat as governor in 1926; the failure of the state to undergo major political realignment during the 1930s; the exploitation of the Communism issue during the 1938 election; the impact of the Cold War on politics; the emergence of economic growth and prosperity during the postwar period; the revitalization of the Democratic party led by George S. McGovern during the 1950s; the failure of the Richard F. Kneip administration to enact an income tax; and the William Janklow regime during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Implicit in each episode is the sense that events might have hap-

pened differently. The operating assumption is that history is discontinuous rather than being static or a smoothly unfolding story; certain periods contain larger potential for change than others, conditioned by critical economic challenges and crises, altered political circumstances, social evolution, technological developments, the appearance on the scene of transformative leaders, or other factors. Not an island unto itself, South Dakota has always been affected by political winds blowing in from surrounding states, the region, and the nation, and even from abroad.

The rise of the progressive movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century illustrates this notion, because political progressives became a major anchoring point for later political development in the state and an inspiration for subsequent individuals and groups inclined toward reform and the positive use of government. The Midwest, led by governors such as Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, Albert B. Cummins of Iowa, and Samuel R. Van Sant of Minnesota and by mayors such as Hazen Pingree of Detroit and Samuel Jones of Toledo, was a hotbed of political progressivism and one of its birthplaces.[6] Nurtured in the rising cities, flowing over to the state level, and finally emerging as a national phenomenon, political progressivism envisioned an expanded role for government in addressing social and economic problems emerging from or exacerbated by industrialization, urbanization, and the bureaucratization of society.[7] It called

6. Russel B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870–1958* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959). On politics in the Midwest generally, *see* John H. Fenton, *Midwest Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966).

7. The international dimension of the progressive movement is delineated in James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Robert Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal-Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Knopf, 1969); and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000). Important general treatments of political progressivism include Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of

for both political and social reforms, including the direct election of United States senators, direct primary elections, measures to eliminate corruption, campaign-spending reporting, taxation based upon ability to pay, restrictions on children's and women's labor, workmen's compensation, regulation of banking, insurance, railroads, and other corporations, and other innovations.

The movement was bipartisan in nature, but in South Dakota, as in several neighboring states, because the GOP was so predominant, it remained a largely Republican phenomenon. In order to achieve power, its emerging leadership needed to overcome the viselike grip on party machinery maintained by Stalwarts such as prominent Sioux Falls attorney Alfred B. Kittredge. The movement's earliest standard-bearer in South Dakota was Huron lawyer Coe Crawford, who, as chief legal counsel for the Chicago & North Western Railroad in the state, had earlier been part of the ruling "machine." Inspired by La Follette's example in Wisconsin, Crawford cast his lot with the reformers and captured the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1906. During two years as governor, he put his signature on laws implementing direct primary elections and initiating a broad program of reform before moving on to the United States Senate after the election of 1908. Eight years later, following two other progressive Republican governors, Peter Norbeck assumed leadership of the movement, ratcheting up the intensity of reform and installing what some observers characterized as "state socialism." His legislative agenda included the rural-credits program, state hail insurance, and a state-owned coal mine and cement plant. Heavily influenced, like many other Progressives, by the example of President Theodore Roosevelt, Norbeck emerged as a staunch conservationist. His proudest accomplishment was the creation of Custer State Park, where he personally helped to lay out the Needles Highway and other scenic roads.[8]

Harvard University Press, 1991); and Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

8. For Crawford's political career, *see* Calvin Perry Armin, "Coe I. Crawford and the Progressive Movement in South Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 32 (1964): 23–231. Gilbert C. Fite's *Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2005) remains the definitive work on the progressive Republican.

The careers of Crawford and Norbeck illustrated the huge importance of dynamic leadership in promoting political progressivism at both the state and national levels (Roosevelt, La Follette, and Woodrow Wilson stood out nationally). Norbeck's successor, William H. McMaster, who continued in the governor's chair until 1925 and who, like Crawford and Norbeck, went on to serve in the United States Senate, was also a progressive, showing that progressivism was more than simply the work of a few charismatic leaders. It was, in fact, a widely popular mass movement, welling up from the populace and encompassing a broad spectrum of agricultural, working-class, and middle-class constituencies that were concerned about modernizing developments in the society and the economy and determined to deal with them in rational and enlightened ways. Political progressivism was significant in the long term in that it legitimated the practice of government intervention at points where the public deemed it necessary, but it was also self-consciously opposed to extending government power too far. Like Theodore Roosevelt at the national level, progressive spokesmen in South Dakota presented practical solutions as substitutes for and as inoculations against socialism and other more radical ideologies. The movement was also, in large measure, moralistic and promoted social values such as consumer protection and efficiency.[9] Governor Robert S. Vessey, a devout Methodist layman from Wessington Springs, stood out especially prominently as a devotee of moralism in politics. He signed legislation prohibiting drinking and gambling on passenger trains, banning the use of profanity, and eliminating the free flow of liquor on election days. He was also the first state governor to make Mother's Day an official observance, thereby burnishing his credentials as a protector of the traditional home.[10]

Peter Norbeck, whose promotion of state-owned enterprises in

9. On progressivism and the idea of efficiency, *see* Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959). On moralism and politics, *see* Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

10. Ernest Vessey and Fred Dunham, "Robert Scadden Vessey," in *Over a Century of Leadership: South Dakota Territorial and State Governors,* ed. Lynwood E. Oyos (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1987), p. 88.

South Dakota during the late teens closely resembled the kinds of socialistic schemes being enacted simultaneously under the influence of the NPL in North Dakota, might logically have become a political partner of the latter group. The NPL swept down into the northeastern part of the state during the fall of 1916 and soon claimed to have signed up twenty thousand dues-paying members. Although the numbers may have been slightly exaggerated, there is no doubt that the governor viewed the upstart organization as a challenge to his leadership and authority in the state, and he did his utmost to oppose and suppress it.[11] In the kind of counterfactual exercise we are conducting, it is interesting to speculate about how South Dakota's political history might have turned out differently had Norbeck, instead of viewing the NPL as a challenger and even an enemy, focused his energies upon points of similarity between it and his own brand of progressivism. Had he decided to become an ally of the NPL, South Dakota might conceivably have followed a path closer to those taken by North Dakota and Minnesota during the 1920s and 1930s. In the former state, the league remained a strong force within the Republican party during and after the Prosperity Decade, and, as a result, the political culture of North Dakota remained much more open to progressive and liberal ideas than did South Dakota's. Even more decisively, the work of the NPL in Minnesota during the 1920s helped the Farmer-Labor party become an effective governing body, leading to an alliance between it and the Democrats that culminated in the formation of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party (DFL) in 1944.[12]

Politics would evolve differently in South Dakota. Here, radical activists found an outlet for their energies in the Farmer-Labor party during the years after World War I.[13] Progressivism lived on in attenu-

11. Fite, *Peter Norbeck,* pp. 59–69; Gilbert C. Fite, "Peter Norbeck and the Defeat of the Nonpartisan League in South Dakota," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33 (Sept. 1946): 217–36.

12. *See* Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955); John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

13. On 1920s radicalism in South Dakota, *see* William C. Pratt, "Another South Da-

ated form during the later 1920s inside a "Norbeck faction" within the South Dakota Republican party, supported by politicians, newspaper editors, and other camp followers, such as *Watertown Public Opinion* editor S. X. Way.[14] With Norbeck's death from cancer in 1936, progressive Republicanism in the state lost its most effective leader, and the party subsequently drifted toward a more unidimensional, tradition-oriented conservatism, represented by leaders such as Karl Mundt, Francis Case, and *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* editor Fred Christopherson. Without a long-running or well-organized liberal faction operating within the Democratic party, the possibilities for true contestation of ideologies at election time remained faint throughout the 1940s and into the early 1950s.

Meanwhile, another important result flowing out of the progressive period is worth mentioning. The unfortunate economic fallout from this episode would shape and color statewide politics for decades, right up to the present time. I am referring to the impact of Peter Norbeck's signing of the Rural Credits Law of 1917 and the subsequent collapse and bankruptcy of the program a decade later. These developments marked the darkest blot on an otherwise stellar career. Remarkably, the failure of rural credits seems to have left no permanent stain on Norbeck's reputation, and it certainly did not prevent him from winning reelection to high office throughout his lifetime (he was the only major South Dakota Republican office-seeker and, aside from Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota, the only incumbent Republican United States Senator from the Midwest to withstand the New Deal political deluge in 1932).[15]

The motives behind the rural-loan program were laudable and understandable. Farmers perennially needed credit, and in a context in which banking institutions were often viewed as predatory exploiters

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kota; or, The Road Not Taken: The Left and the Shaping of South Dakota Political Culture," in *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota Political Culture,* ed. Jon K. Lauck, John E. Miller, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr. (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011), pp. 112–15.

14. Fite, *Peter Norbeck,* pp. 200–203; D. J. Cline, *Perfection, Never Less: The Vera Way Marghab Story* (Brookings: South Dakota Art Museum, 1998), pp. 2–4.

15. On rural credits and the election of 1932, *see* Fite, *Peter Norbeck,* pp. 80–87, 121–22, 189.

rather than as helpful financial intermediaries, progressives perceived the possibility of using the state's resources to make credit both cheaper and more readily available to hard-pressed farmers. The law passed by the legislature in 1917 allowed the state to borrow money at the lowest interest rates it could obtain and then re-lend it to farmers at rates that were somewhat higher, but still below those available on the open market. The program presented a classic instance of replacing market mechanisms with a government substitute. Although the plan proved popular with farmers, judged by its widespread use, its champions failed to foresee how economic straits in farm areas during the postwar 1920s and lax loan-eligibility standards would undermine its fiscal integrity. By 1925, the system was in meltdown. Two years later, it had to be dismantled. That was not the end of the story, however. It would take the better part of three decades for the state finally to pay off the obligations it had taken on when farmers were unable to repay their loans. Eventually, the program cost the state $57 million.[16]

The most profound long-term consequence of the experience was not merely the money that was lost to South Dakota and the increased tax obligation the citizenry was forced to assume in order to pay off the debt. Beyond that legacy, the debacle helped to reinforce a penurious mindset and a suspicion of government that continues to this day. This factor is not the only one that explains why South Dakota's level of taxation eventually became the lowest in the country, but it is a major one.[17] When examining elements that set South Dakota's political system apart from those in other states, this episode has to be one of the first places to look.

None of these first three examples should raise any eyebrows with regard to explaining South Dakota's current political culture. The next one, however, will probably be unfamiliar to most readers. The 1926 election stands out obviously enough as the first time in the state's po-

16. Gilbert C. Fite, "South Dakota's Rural Credit System: A Venture in State Socialism, 1917–1946," *Agricultural History* 21 (Oct. 1947): 239–49.

17. On South Dakota's status as the lowest-taxed state in the Union, *see The Book of the States,* vol. 41 (Lexington, Ky.: Council of State Governments, 2009), pp. 397–99, and *World Almanac and Book of Facts 2009* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: World Almanac Books, 2009), p. 99.

litical history (if one counts Andrew E. Lee in 1896 and 1898 as a Populist rather than as a Democratic candidate) that the electorate gave its blessing to a Democratic candidate for the governor's office. Longtime Beresford city attorney and one-term mayor William J. Bulow was anything but an unusual or exciting candidate, and economic conditions in the state during the mid-1920s, while not sharing in the general prosperity of the country, were not particularly out of line with past trends. Bulow was something of an accidental nominee, having been placed on the ticket at the last minute in 1924 when the Democrats' original candidate was trampled to death by a bull. Though losing the first time out, Bulow ran again two years later and found himself in the governor's chair following the election. This instance marks the only time in South Dakota history when a governor came to power because of a raging bull.[18]

More to the point, Bulow's win came about not primarily because of his own endowments or because of the splendid organizing and campaigning abilities of the Democratic party. Rather, he happened to be in the right place at the right time.[19] Although a number of clues point to considerable disgruntlement and ferment within the Republican party, little has been written about this aspect. It is truer to say that the Republicans lost the 1926 election than that the Democrats won it, although the latter certainly benefited from the situation. Following upon a lengthy tradition of two-term governors, the incumbent, Carl Gunderson, suffered fallout from a scandal in the state banking department while also alienating large numbers within his own party with his budgetary approach, appointments practices, and an abortive effort to reduce the number of teacher-training institutions in the state.

18. "William John Bulow," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership,* pp. 115–18; Larry Pressler, *U.S. Senators from the Prairie* (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Dakota Press, 1982), pp. 97–100.

19. I first suspected the possible significance of the 1926 election when in 1977, after attending a summer seminar on statistical history at the Newberry Library in Chicago, I ran correlations on every gubernatorial election in South Dakota history up to that time. Fed with county-wide election statistics, the computer spat out figures showing high rates of correlation between almost all elections close in time to each other, indicating that there was basic continuity in voters' behavior from election to election. Two contests stood out, however, as distinct anomalies, with extremely low correlation coefficients to elections both before and after them: the elections of 1924 and 1926.

More seriously, he angered Peter Norbeck and many of his cohorts by endeavoring to pin Norbeck with blame for the rural-credits fiasco and by his lack of enthusiasm for the senator's park and conservation projects. All of this exacerbated normal tensions between the more conservative and the more progressive wings of the party. In 1926, Norbeck and many of his followers "took a walk," either crossing party lines to vote for the Democratic candidate or deciding not to check a box in the gubernatorial column on their election ballots. When the votes were tallied, Republicans retained every other state office that year and held on to an overwhelming 110-to-37 margin in the legislature, but Gunderson found himself out in the cold.[20]

These events could be interpreted simply as one more time in which disgruntled groups threw the "ins" out of office. Four years later, Republicans recaptured the governor's chair with mild-mannered Warren E. Green, a farmer from Hamlin County. He was chosen to run at the state convention even though he had finished the Republican party primary last among five contestants, none of whom managed to garner the required 35 percent of the vote in the first heat.[21] There was more to the story, however. The Democratic Bulow, once in office, where he served from 1927 through 1930, proved to be no less conservative and was perhaps even more conservative than alternatives the Republicans might have put up against him. After two terms in Pierre, he went on to two terms in the United States Senate, proving once again that in South Dakota personality often trumps ideology. Bulow was a well-liked and effective politician, but as the state's most prominent Democratic leader for sixteen crucial years, his conservative stance stood in the way of the party's being able to change with the times, especially during the politically fertile years of the 1930s. Had South Dakota sent someone to Washington, D.C., who was friendlier to Franklin Roosevelt and more receptive to his New Deal message, the state might con-

20. "William John Bulow," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership,* p. 116; George S. McGovern, "Carl Gunderson," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership,* p. 113; Fite, *Peter Norbeck,* pp. 84, 122, 184; Suzanne Barta Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles: Black Hills Tourism, 1880–1941* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2009), pp. 74–77.

21. Donald D. Parker, "Warren Everett Green," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership,* p. 122.

ceivably have begun to converge in its political behavior with some of its neighbors.[22]

This state of affairs leads directly to a fifth turning point in South Dakota's political history—or should we say the absence of a turning point? The most important thing to say about South Dakota politics during the 1930s is that the state failed to follow national trends by undergoing the type of political realignment that occurred generally across the United States. Roosevelt's New Deal wrought a major political revolution nationally, transforming the Democrats into the majority party for the next generation.[23] The vaunted Roosevelt coalition was built around the "solid South," labor-union members, ethnic minorities, black voters, the working classes, the underprivileged, and a much smaller segment of intellectuals. Beyond people of immigrant background, who played prominent roles in South Dakota's history, the forces contributing to Democratic majorities nationwide were in short supply in the state. Moreover, the ethnic groups that proved especially responsive to New Deal entreaties—southern and eastern Europeans—were prominent by their relative absence in South Dakota. These facts alone, however, would not explain the state's failure to follow a path more in line with several of its agriculturally oriented neighbors in the Midwest and on the Northern Great Plains, such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Iowa. Long predominantly Republican in their partisan proclivities, these states' two parties became much more competitive during the 1930s and continuing after World War II. South Dakota, on the other hand, after a brief fling

22. "William John Bulow," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership,* pp. 117–18.

23. The foundational statement of realignment theory was V. O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (Feb. 1955): 3–18. More detailed discussions can be found in Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale, *Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties, and Government in American History* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1980); James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States,* rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1983); Everett Carll Ladd, Jr., with Charles D. Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); and Theodore Rosenof, *Realignment: The Theory That Changed the Way We Think about American Politics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

with a Democratic governor and a Democratic-controlled legislature, quickly reverted to the traditional form of dominant one-party Republican control. Why?

Beyond the small size in South Dakota of groups forming the core of the New Deal coalition, the leaders who emerged to guide the party during its brief period of ascendancy took positions and made strategic decisions that contributed to their failure to attain majority status over the long haul. The Democratic victor in the 1932 gubernatorial election was Tom Berry, a colorful, plain-spoken rancher from Belvidere. Berry was an interesting and popular personality who "branded" himself with a ten-gallon hat and an axe, which he said he would take to Pierre to whack away at the state budget.[24] During Franklin Roosevelt's first administration, government in Washington, D.C., and public opinion both moved in a consistently liberal direction, resulting in a huge Democratic landslide in 1936. The political tenor in South Dakota under Governor Berry, meanwhile, turned out to be much more tentative, with the citizenry being grateful for federal handouts but ambivalent and increasingly skeptical about New Deal-style programs that intervened in people's affairs and increased government expenditures.

Many South Dakotans benefited from and approved of specific programs, such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Rural Electrification Administration. Vocal opposition arose, however, to condemn excessive government spending, corporate regulation, and deficit financing and to allege that the New Deal was socialistic or even Communistic. Defenders of Roosevelt and the New Deal failed to muster a voice in South Dakota that was strong enough to counteract the critics. Senator Bulow in Washington and Governor Berry in Pierre remained ambivalent themselves, if not downright critical, of Roosevelt and his minions and failed to provide the kind of leadership that might have brought about permanent competitiveness for the Democratic party. By 1936, the year Roosevelt won 61 percent of the popular vote, carrying forty-six of forty-eight states, and Democrats

24. Joseph V. Ryan, "Tom Berry," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership*, pp. 127–31.

captured 77 percent of the seats in Congress, Republicans managed to take back control of the governor's office in Pierre and occupied 88 of the 148 seats in the state legislature.[25]

Part of the blame for the Democratic failure, too, must go to its congressional representatives—lukewarm New Deal advocates Theodore B. Werner and Fred H. Hildebrandt—and to Democratic leaders in the legislature, Emil Loriks and Oscar Fosheim. Loriks and Fosheim, farmers from Oldham and Howard, respectively, and leaders in the Farmers Union and the short-lived Farm Holiday movement of 1932 and 1933, were both staunch New Dealers and desirous of remaking the Democrats into a more liberal and effective party. They and their legislative cohorts passed some important emergency legislation, such as a mortgage foreclosure moratorium, extension of payment on property taxes, and a state income tax (which was soon modified and then repealed several years later). Loriks and Fosheim earned the label the "Gold-dust Twins" for their efforts to impose an ore tax on the Homestake gold mine in an attempt to plug holes in state revenues. They also, however, led a farmer-backed movement to reduce state expenditures during the 1933 legislature that went beyond even the 20-percent cuts proposed by Governor Berry.[26] The four-year window available for bringing about a major shift in the direction and philosophy of the Democratic party was not long enough for them to move beyond basic reactions to moments of crisis or to apply long-term creative thinking to the issues. Short biennial sessions of the legislature also restricted their opportunities for building any kind of continuity. The New Deal era thus needs to be seen as a lost opportunity for the Democrats to establish effective two-party competition in the state.

25. Paul A. O'Rourke, "South Dakota Politics during the New Deal Years," *South Dakota History* 1 (Summer 1971): 231–71; Philip A. Grant, Jr., "Presidential Politics in South Dakota, 1936," *South Dakota History* 22 (Fall 1992): 261–75; John E. Miller, "The Failure to Realign: The 1936 Election in South Dakota," *Journal of the West* 41 (Fall 2002): 22–29.

26. Elizabeth Williams, *Emil Loriks: Builder of a New Economic Order* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1987), pp. 17–34, 45–52; Matthew Cecil, "Democratic Party Politics and the South Dakota Income Tax, 1933–1942," *South Dakota History* 26 (Summer/Fall 1996): 137–69; John E. Miller, "Restrained, Respectable Radicals: The South Dakota Farm Holiday," *Agricultural History* 59 (July 1985): 429-47; Hans A. Ustrud, *Behind the Scenes at the State-House* (Huron, S.Dak.: Kiel Bros., 1933).

The Republican party, having found itself on the defensive for the second time in a decade, moved swiftly to lance the boil. After regaining control of the governorship in 1936, Republicans waged a campaign two years later that effectively knocked the Democrats out of serious political contention for the next decade and a half. The campaign plan of the Republican candidates for major office that year was straightforward: paint their Democratic opponents as radicals, extremists, and even Communists. At the center of the strategy, which can accurately be termed "McCarthyism before McCarthy," was Fred Christopherson and his *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*. South Dakota was not the only state where allegations of radicalism and Communism were employed during the 1930s and 1940s to win votes, but it was one of the more egregious examples of the phenomenon.

As was the case with the senator from Wisconsin a decade and a half later, the charges were half-baked and flimsy, although there was an intriguing nugget of information that stoked people's suspicions. Democratic Congressman Fred Hildebrandt had hired a secretary in his Washington, D.C., office, who, unbeknownst to him, had once been a member of the Communist party. The Republicans played the revelation for all it was worth. Beyond that, just being a New Dealer or a backer of the Farmers Union or the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was enough in the minds of conspiratorial thinkers to identify a person as a Communist. Oscar Fosheim, running for governor against Miller attorney Harlan J. Bushfield, and Emil Loriks, running for the first-district congressional seat against Madison professor/businessman Karl Mundt, were both closely associated with the Farmers Union and strongly supportive of the labor movement. Tom Berry, running for the United States Senate against Yankton nurseryman John Chandler ("Chan") Gurney, however, was a far cry from a New Dealer, let alone a liberal or radical. Loriks ran advertisements documenting his own wearing of the uniform during World War I (Mundt had been just seventeen when the United States entered the war and was too young to enlist), but Loriks and his running mates were accused of being un-American nevertheless. The strategy worked. The Republicans swept the election with approximately 54 percent of the vote. Mundt, who would go on to a thirty-four-year career in the House and the Sen-

ate, later built his political reputation around anti-Communism.[27]

The following decade of war and Cold War reinforced the impulse to exploit the anti-Communist issue. This era would be the most lopsided period of Republican domination in state history and also its most conservative period. After 1945, emerging tensions with the Soviet Union helped to stoke an atmosphere conducive to conservative Republicanism. Karl Mundt joined the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1943 and, after moving up to the Senate in 1948, became a close colleague and personal friend of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin. Mundt was part of a large coterie that used anti-Communism as a wedge issue in politics.[28] Throughout the 1950s, the number-two plank in every statewide Republican platform was opposition to Communism (the top spot continued to be reserved for agriculture for the next forty years).[29] Historian R. Alton Lee, in an article for *South Dakota History*, delineated how Communism became an issue on the University of South Dakota campus, but, by and large, the state escaped the extreme controversies that embroiled institutions such as the University of California and Brooklyn College.[30] This turn of events derived in part from the smaller number of individuals in South Dakota who were inclined toward dissent and challenging established mores. Such people, recognizing the political culture of the time for what it was, may have avoided moving into the state in the first place or decided to leave when opportunities arose.

27. John E. Miller, "McCarthyism before McCarthy: The 1938 Election in South Dakota," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 15 (Summer 1982): 1-21; Scott N. Heidepriem, *A Fair Chance for a Free People: Biography of Karl E. Mundt, United States Senator* (Madison, S.Dak.: Leader Printing Co., 1988), pp. 22–28.

28. Especially useful studies on anti-Communism as a political issue in the 1940s and 1950s are Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate,* 2d ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987); David M. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (New York: Free Press, 1983); Thomas C. Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy* (New York: Stein & Day, 1982); and Athan Theoharis, *Seeds of Repression: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of McCarthyism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971).

29. John E. Miller, "Setting the Agenda: Political Parties and Historical Change," in Lauck, Miller, and Simmons, eds., *The Plains Political Tradition,* p. 89.

30. Lee, "McCarthyism at the University of South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 19 (Fall 1989): 424–38.

The Cold War affected South Dakota in other ways, most prominently in the manner in which it funneled defense dollars into Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City. The B-52s stationed there constituted a major element in the Strategic Air Command's bomber contingent, and later Titan and Minuteman missiles controlled from Ellsworth became part of the nation's intercontinental ballistic missile force. South Dakota was slower than most states to eliminate the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) requirement for male students at its land-grant institution, South Dakota State University, and antiwar demonstrations during the Vietnam War, while increasing by 1970, tended to be less numerous and more tame than those on other college campuses. Richard M. Nixon, looking for a college setting in which to deliver a speech early during his presidency, chose General Beadle State College in Madison, where his friend, Senator Mundt, was simultaneously planning to dedicate the new Mundt Library named in his honor on the campus. The president assumed, no doubt correctly, that South Dakota students would be less likely than their counterparts elsewhere to confront him with heckling or egg-throwing. Had there been no Cold War, it seems safe to say, the heavily conservative tenor of politics in the state during the forties and fifties would have been less uniform and intense. Cold War tensions and assumptions helped contribute to Republican hegemony during this period.

The prosperity and economic growth that developed after World War II affected politics in less predictable ways. The kind of contentment and complacency that many cultural critics perceived flowing from economic affluence probably worked mainly to the Republicans' advantage, inclining the populace toward business values, increasing respect for the market, and undergirding satisfaction with the status quo. But economist John Kenneth Galbraith's 1958 best-selling book *The Affluent Society* emphasized the persistence of poverty amidst affluence, suggesting that a wealthier America could afford to address the questions of social inequality and inadequate opportunity that had been festering to that time. The controversial Harvard economist advised Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, who would both push for antipoverty programs, Medicare and Medicaid, federal aid to education, and a variety of other federal-spending programs. By

then, George S. McGovern was a staunch supporter of such legislation in the United States Senate, and he would propose a reform agenda during his 1972 presidential run based upon the ability of Americans to create a fairer and more just society in the context of economic growth.[31]

One should be careful to distinguish between the federal government, on the one hand, and state and local government, on the other, in analyzing the attitudes and electoral behavior of South Dakota voters and politicians. Economic affluence enhanced the federal government's ability to funnel money to the states, and South Dakotans during the postwar period seemed increasingly willing to position themselves at the receiving end of those dollars, so long as state monies were not involved. This behavior stood out most obviously in the ritual deference paid by politicians to calls for agricultural parity and higher price supports. South Dakotans never had much quarrel with federal spending on the Missouri River dams, interstate highways, various water projects, defense installations, college-loan subsidies, and other popular programs.[32] The state stood among the vanguard of those that received more money back from Washington, D.C., than they sent to it in the form of taxes.[33] More recently, in the wake of the 2008 recession, federal stimulus dollars were welcomed to bail out the state budget more than once.

31. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958); George S. McGovern, *Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern* (New York: Random House, 1977); Robert Sam Anson, *McGovern: A Biography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972); Robert P. Watson, ed., *George McGovern: A Political Life, a Political Legacy* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004); Jon K. Lauck, "George S. McGovern and the Farmer: South Dakota Politics, 1953–1962," *South Dakota History* 32 (Winter 2002): 331–53.

32. *See,* variously, Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians Revisited: The Continuing History of the Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2009); John Ferrell, "Developing the Missouri: South Dakota and the Pick-Sloan Plan," *South Dakota History* 19 (Fall 1989): 306–41; Richard R. Chenoweth, "Francis Case: A Political Biography," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 39 (1979): 412–18; Peter Carrels, *Uphill against Water: The Great Dakota Water War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); and Gretchen Heefner and Catherine McNicol Stock, "Missiles and Militarization: How the Cold War Shaped South Dakota Political Culture," in Lauck, Miller, and Simmons, eds., *The Plains Political Tradition,* pp. 211–38.

33. In recent years, South Dakota has continued to rank among the top ten states in the ratio of federal expenditures allocated to dollars received in revenue. *See* Clem,

This basic contradiction might be described as the "big elephant in the room" when talking about South Dakota political culture. On the one hand, state residents welcome government dollars channeled their way from Washington; on the other, they take an especially tight-fisted approach toward spending in Pierre, because they know that budgets at that level must be balanced and that at least part of the dollars spent must come directly out of residents' pockets in the form of state and local taxes. This practice has meant that the central issues of state politics have come to revolve around the annual budgetary process. It has been a while since legislators in Pierre asked, "What are the needs of our state, and how best can we meet them?"; i.e., "How shall we raise the money to pay for them?" Instead, the conversation goes more like this: "How many dollars do we have, based upon the tax system already in place?" and, secondly, "How shall we distribute those dollars in a way that nobody is seriously hurt and everybody is minimally—if insufficiently—satisfied?"

The last time the state conducted a truly vigorous debate on tax policy was during the 1970s, but that is getting ahead of the story. First, we need to look at the political realignment that began during the 1950s, twenty years later than similar developments had begun to occur in many surrounding states as a result of the New Deal. The South Dakota drama began when state Democratic party chair Ward Clark talked to thirty-two-year-old Dakota Wesleyan history professor George McGovern and offered him a job. His task was to become the party's executive director, assigned with building up party membership and enthusiasm. Part of his responsibility would be to raise enough money to pay for his own salary. That was in 1954. Two years later, McGovern successfully ran for Congress, and two years after that Ralph Herseth was elected the first Democratic governor in more than two decades. Meanwhile, the Republican advantage in the legislature, which had stood at 108 to 2 in their favor in 1954, had been reduced to 58 to 52.

One might attribute this seeming miracle to the tremendous organizing talents of young McGovern, and he deserves much credit for

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Government by the People?, p. 55, and Stanley D. Brunn et al., eds., *Atlas of the 2008 Elections* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), p. 212.

the accomplishment. But it was the astute exploitation on the part of McGovern and the Democrats of farmer discontent with Republican agricultural policies emanating from Washington—and specifically with the leadership of Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson—that also played a huge role in the change. Throughout the Midwest during the mid-1950s, Republicans complained that they had been sacrificed on the altar of "Bensonism." The off-year elections of 1958 were hard on the GOP all over the country, what with the Soviets' launching of the *Sputnik* satellite and the worst recession since the 1930s. The 1950s thus provided a preview of genuine two-party competition in South Dakota, if not the real thing. Republican hegemony, with few exceptions, remained intact until the 1970s.[34]

That decade would prove different. The 1970 election stood out most of all. Richard F. Kneip got elected as a Democrat and would go on to become the state's first three-term governor and the first to be elected to a four-year term of office (although he would leave his post at the end of his final term to become ambassador to Singapore). In addition to reorganizing state government by reducing the number of boards, bureaus, and offices from more than 160 to 16, Kneip made his top priority the reformation of state revenues by introducing an income tax. Its defeat by a single vote in the state senate in 1973 doomed what would have been the most important fiscal change in the state's history.[35] Since then, the notion that income taxes are off the agenda for serious discussion has become a widely accepted shibboleth of South Dakota politics—perhaps its most important axiom.

The year 1970 also witnessed Frank E. Denholm, a former FBI agent, and James G. Abourezk, a maverick West River lawyer, getting elected to Congress. The latter went on two years later to the United States

34. The persistence of strong Republican tendencies is noted by Fred W. Zuercher, "A Measure of Party Strength in the Fifty States," *Public Affairs,* no. 32 (Vermillion: Governmental Research Bureau, University of South Dakota, 15 Feb. 1968): 1–8, and Clem, *Government by the People?,* p. 13. John Gunther, in his classic study *Inside U. S. A.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), p. 247, described South Dakota as "extremely conservative" and "almost as Republican as, say, Alabama is Democratic."

35. John Andrews, "South Dakota during the Administration of Governor Richard F. Kneip, 1971–1978" (master's thesis, University of South Dakota, 2007), pp. 20–48; Daniel B. Garry, "Richard F. Kneip," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership,* pp. 199–205.

Senate and, unlike most others elected to that body, did not find the position desirable enough to run for reelection. The 1970s marked the real beginning of Democratic competitiveness with Republicans in the legislature. After that time, Republicans generally continued to dominate that branch of government, but they had to work harder to maintain their position, and from time to time they actually lost control of one of the houses. The governorship was another story; no Democratic candidate managed to follow in Kneip's footsteps. In Congress, however, Democratic candidates triumphed frequently, although often by slim margins. Denholm was gone after four years and Abourezk after eight, but Tom Daschle went on to a long career in the House and Senate, and Tim Johnson also became a fixture in both bodies, while Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, granddaughter of former governor Ralph E. Herseth, became a strong vote-getter in contests for the House. Had genuine two-party competition finally arrived in South Dakota? The answer, perhaps, lies more in the eye of the beholder than in the world of reality.

Finally, the showstopper—Bill Janklow. During the 1930s, Louisiana Governor Huey Long had liked to refer to himself as "sui generis," or one of a kind, and the label could equally be applied to the South Dakotan, although comparisons between the two should not be carried too far. Serving four four-year terms as governor between 1979 and 2003, divided by an eight-year hiatus and followed by a short stint in the United States House of Representatives, Janklow more than doubled the previous record for longevity in the governor's office. Because his actions and policies sometimes looked so unpredictable and even paradoxical—witness his drives for the state purchase of a rail system, closure of a state college, negotiation of Missouri River water rights for a coal-slurry pipeline, and wooing of the credit-card industry to Sioux Falls—the particulars of the governor's political philosophy appeared somewhat difficult to understand to many observers.[36] Viewed as a whole, however, they cohered.

Janklow's first principle was to keep costs and spending down, which was accomplished by careful scrutiny of every line item in the

36. James Soyer, "William Janklow," in Oyos, ed., *Over a Century of Leadership,* pp. 211–17.

budget and strong opposition to increased taxes. With that assumption firmly in place, everything else became a matter of filling in the gaps. Secondly, following and expanding upon the work of his predecessors in office, he was always looking for ways to stimulate and promote the state's economic development. Finally, he was a hands-on governor who considered every aspect of state government, from top to bottom, to be his bailiwick. In the minds of some, this trait made Janklow an active, take-charge sort of guy who eliminated waste and sought out every efficiency. Others interpreted his character as dictatorial and overbearing. Few remained neutral in their evaluations. One thing is certain: without Janklow in office, things would have turned out differently. Exactly how is unclear, but he set his personal stamp on government for the better part of a quarter century.

Identifying eleven major turning points in South Dakota political history—episodes during which the historical narrative could have taken a different direction—is a hazardous venture, at best. By setting forth a baseline for further study of the subject, however, I believe that we can proceed to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge and, in the process, perhaps identify new moments of major transition. Other important decisions were made, avenues were opened up, and doors were closed during the events discussed in this article. The study of South Dakota political history, compared to that of many other states, remains largely virgin territory. The opportunities for further investigation are legion. Let the burrowing begin.