Coe I. Crawford and the Progressive Campaign of 1912

LEONARD SCHLUP

Coe Isaac Crawford, founder of the progressive movement in South Dakota, was born near Volney, Allamakee County, Iowa, on 14 January 1858. He was the fourth son of Robert and Sarah Shannon Crawford, who had emigrated from Ohio seven years earlier. After having attended public schools and studying under a private tutor, he graduated from the University of Iowa with a law degree in 1882. Although young Crawford began his practice at Independence, Iowa, he quickly moved in 1883 to Pierre, Dakota Territory. There he gained recognition for his legal and political knowledge and won several positions, including prosecuting attorney of Hughes County (1887-1888) and membership on the last Territorial Legislative Council in 1889. Upon admission of South Dakota into the Union, Crawford was elected to the first state senate and later served as attorney general of South Dakota from 1892 to 1896. In the latter year, he was unsuccessful as a Republican candidate for representative-at-large to Congress, having been defeated by the fusion of Populists and Democrats.1

Following William McKinley's inauguration as President in 1897, Crawford moved to Huron to begin a new phase of his

^{1.} Gilbert Courtland Fite, Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman, University of Missouri Studies, vol. 22, no. 2 (Columbia, 1948), p. 30. See also New York Times, 26 Apr. 1944, p. 19.

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Coe I. Crawford

political career. He was appointed attorney for the Chicago and North Western Railway Company for the state of South Dakota, an experience which convinced him of the necessity for political reforms to emancipate South Dakota from the control of corporations, party bosses, and railroad influences. When Crawford resigned his position in 1903, he revolted against the state political machine that was headed by Senator Alfred Beard Kittredge of Sioux Falls. Pledging to wage an independent crusade for progressive Republicanism, Crawford campaigned for the governorship in 1904 but suffered a defeat at his party's state convention when the conservatives selected Samuel H. Elrod, who won the election.²

The Huron insurgent refused to accept his loss as final. He instantly regrouped his forces and worked with Governor Robert Marion LaFollette of Wisconsin, who toured South Dakota advocating reform in June 1905. The next year, after a vigorously fought contest, progressive delegates captured control of the Republican State Convention and nominated Crawford for governor. He campaigned and won on a platform committed to change, indicated by the proposal to legislate against railroad abuses.³

Crawford, the sixth governor of South Dakota, served from 1907 to 1909. During his administration, laws establishing a direct primary election, means to regulate lobbying, and provisions requiring the publication of campaign expenditures, among other new laws, went into operation. By these actions and his support of liberal principles, Governor Crawford inaugurated the progressive movement in the state and attracted national attention at the time of the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909).

During the presidential campaign of 1908, Crawford, a delegate

2. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 259-60.

3. Ibid.; Fite, Peter Norbeck, pp. 30-31. See also Russel B. Nye, Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870-1950 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1951), p. 233.



Campaign button promoting Taft for president, Crawford for senator, and Robert S. Vessey for governor of South Dakota, 1908.

to the Republican National Convention at Chicago, supported the nomination and election of William Howard Taft, secretary of war and Republican standard-bearer, for president, Because Taft was Roosevelt's personal choice as heir to the Republican regime and because he seemed committed to progressive principles, Crawford entertained no reservations about the ability of the Ohioan to execute his promises. Cordial relations existed between the two leaders. In fact, the governor invited Taft to attend the South Dakota State Fair and address the crowd.4 Robert Jackson Gamble, conservative Republican senator from Yankton. South Dakota, echoed Crawford's enthusiasm when he wrote to the presidential contender on 23 June: "South Dakota, four years ago, cast the highest percent of Republican votes of any state in



Candidate William Howard Taft speaking from a train at Elk Point, South Dakota.

the union and I have confidence she will again do as well by you."5 Taft swept to victory that fall over his Democratic opponent. the beleaguered William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, and he

5. Robert J. Gamble to Taft, 23 June 1908, Taft Papers. Taft carried South

Dakota in 1908.

^{4.} Coe I. Crawford to William H. Taft, 23 May 1907, William Howard Taft Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Telegram, Crawford to Taft, 4 Nov. 1908, Taft Papers; Taft to Crawford, 3 July 1908, Taft Papers.

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assumed the Presidency on 4 March 1909. Joining Taft in Washington was his political ally from Huron. Crawford had won election to the United States Senate, after defeating Kittredge for the nomination in the 1908 primary contest. Fresh from a Republican victory in South Dakota, Crawford took his seat in the Sixty-first Congress to represent the people of his state. His experience as a reform governor served him well when he entered the national arena to debate and enact legislation during a progressive period in American history.

By 1910, however, the alliance between Taft and Crawford had begun to deteriorate. Doubts had surfaced in Crawford's mind regarding the president's reliability as a progressive leader. The immediate issue that contributed to the break was the Payne-Aldrich tariff, which the senator attacked as high protectionism. Although he reluctantly supported the bill after it passed the conference committee, Crawford believed Taft had betrayed the progressive cause by endorsing the bill. Other matters also ac-

celerated the desire to locate another progressive spokesman for

the presidential election.

Former President Roosevelt, who had not tackled tariff reform while in office, was cognizant of the political difficulties enveloping the Taft administration. Writing to Crawford in 1911, Roosevelt, who had visited South Dakota on a summer sojourn the previous year, referred to mutual "progressive friends" and acknowledged that the Senator had been "so kind and courteous" in all his dealings with him. Roosevelt was planning for the future and obviously wanted to include Crawford in his plans.

The Republican party split openly in 1912 on the national level between the followers of President Taft, Senator LaFollette, and Roosevelt. In South Dakota, this same division occurred and, for the most part, mirrored the broader situation. Crawford at first endorsed LaFollette for the G.O.P. presidential nomination mainly because he was the first progressive candidate in the field. Un-

6. Fite, Peter Norbeck, p. 36.

^{7.} Theodore Roosevelt to Crawford, 12 June 1911, in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Elting E. Morison, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951-1954), 7:282. Senator Gamble was also on friendly terms with Roosevelt at this time and wrote the following letter to the former president: "In these days of bitter statements and criticism from certain quarters, I have often thought of you and felt like writing a word of good will and appreciation of your splendid services to your country, which I know will be more appreciated a little later on than it is at this time by certain elements of our citizenship" (Gamble to Roosevelt, 13 Dec. 1910, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

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TR. S.

Theodore Roosevelt campaign buttons.

fortunately, LaFollette was not viewed as a potential winner by many of his cohorts, and they believed his candidacy would imperil progressive success at the convention. Moreover, in February 1912, he suffered a temporary breakdown, which further dissipated his political appeal.

Political conditions in South Dakota, particularly perplexing for conservatives as well as progressives, gained national attention in 1912. Frank Knox of Illinois, vice-chairman of the executive committee of the National Roosevelt Committee, surveyed matters, conferred with progressive leaders in the state, and then reported to Roosevelt on 14 May:

While the situation in South Dakota is extremely favorable and is constantly with each additional Roosevelt success in other states growing more to our advantage, it nevertheless remains most delicately balanced.... Most fortunately for us... the progressives are very much incensed at Senator LaFollette.... In South Dakota we are allied with the recognized leaders of the progressive cause, who endorsed LaFollette in January because he was the only progressive candidate in the field at that time.

Crawford, meanwhile, endorsed the "LaFollette-Roosevelt Progressive Principles" (a slogan designed by state progressives to

8. Frank Knox to Roosevelt, 14 May 1912, Roosevelt Papers.

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unite progressive Republicans under an ideological banner rather than behind one candidate or the other) in the state primary campaign. While doing this, however, he kept his distance from the Wisconsin senator. When LaFollette campaigned in South Dakota immediately preceding the June primary election, Crawford carefully scheduled his appearances separate from those of the presidential aspirant. The South Dakota senator, by that time, was joining the stampede for Roosevelt and becoming one of his vociferous allies.

On 4 June, Roosevelt carried South Dakota in the Republican primary election. The official figures gave him 38,533 votes to 19,860 for LaFollette and 10,944 for Taft. This news greatly cheered the former president, for he contended that it would materially strengthen his position in northern and western states. Two days after his victory, he remarked: "I have made a complete sweep and would have done the same in every State if

the people had been given a fair chance."11

The supporters of the "LaFollette-Roosevelt Progressive Principles," who merged successfully in the primary, divided equally at the Republican National Convention in Chicago two weeks later. There the delegates from South Dakota cast five votes for Roosevelt and five for LaFollette.12 Taft, however, won the nomination. Back home, the progressives still retained control of the party machinery and dominated the South Dakota convention in July. With LaFollette out of the running, they chose electors pledged to Roosevelt, who was forming a progressive third party. When Republican stalwarts later challenged this arrangement in the courts, they failed to carry their case. As a result, the progressive-controlled Republican party offered no presidential slate for Taft, the Republican nominee for reelection, in 1912.13 Vigorously protesting this electoral arrangement, the editor of the Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader summoned his conservative followers to battle. On 24 June, he informed them that "the new progressive party is not likely to make much progress as far as

10. Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 5 June and 22 June 1912.

^{9.} Daily Huronite, 31 May 1912.

^{11.} New York Times, 6 June 1912, p. 2. In August, Roosevelt reiterated his belief in the importance of the South Dakota primary when he informed a reporter: "South Dakota turned the trick. Your state gave the first victory for the cause of progressivism. Not only have your people long been progressives but in the present fight you were first" (Daily Huronite, 12 Aug. 1912).

^{12.} New York Times, 23 June 1912, p. 1.

^{13.} Schell, History of South Dakota, pp. 263-64.

South Dakota is concerned. The fact that the chief business of the proposed new progressive party is to defeat the republican nominees and assist in the election of a democrat will not add

greatly to its prestige in the country."14

One month after Taft's victory at the Chicago convention. Crawford dispatched a letter to Roosevelt urging him to campaign for the progressive cause in South Dakota. "The situation," he warned, "is ripening up for a very lively contest between the progressive republicans and the followers of President Taft." Pleased with the progressive victories for nearly all state offices in the recent primary, Crawford notified Roosevelt that the progressives in South Dakota outnumbered "the old stalwart crowd." He also promised that his colleagues would "declare war" against the Taft reactionaries, including Congressman Charles Henry Burke from Pierre. Finally, Crawford suggested that Roosevelt attend the State Fair at Huron sometime during the week of 9 September in order to "throw down the gauge of battle in our state." He then concluded: "I am ready to take it up and carry it on from that time until the polls are closed in November."15

In August, the delegates attending the Chicago convention of the new Progressive (Bull Moose) party nominated Roosevelt for president with Governor Hiram Warren Johnson of California as his running mate. The presence of this third ticket irritated South Dakota conservatives, who vehemently condemned Crawford and the progressive governor, Robert Scadden Vessey, for their conduct. Old Guard newspapers were quick to capitalize

14. Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 24 June 1912.

^{15.} Crawford to Roosevelt, 19 July 1912, Roosevelt Papers. Roosevelt agreed to journey to South Dakota and urged Crawford to contact Joseph Moore Dixon, Republican senator from Montana and manager of the Roosevelt presidential campaign, in order to coordinate a date for the visit. See Roosevelt to Crawford, 22 July 1912, Roosevelt Papers. Although Roosevelt attended the Minnesota State Fair on 5 September before traveling to North Dakota, Montana, and various western states, he did not stop in South Dakota. See New York Times 7 Sept. 1912, p. 5. Roosevelt's managers had mapped out a major whirlwind campaign for their candidate through the Midwest in October, but they were compelled to cancel many plans due to the attempt to assassinate Roosevelt. On 14 October, John Nepomuk Schrank, a mentally unbalanced saloon keeper who opposed third term candidacies, shot the former president in the chest in front of the Hotel Gilpatrick in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Progressive campaign naturally slowed down while Roosevelt recuperated from this attack. See New York Times, 16 Oct. 1912, p. 4. 16. New York Times, 8 Aug. 1912, pp. 1-2.

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Robert S. Vessey

on the dilemma. For example, the Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader criticized the senator in an editorial on August 10:

Senator Crawford has written a letter approving the bolt of the national ticket by the republican state convention. This means that Senator Crawford has joined the bolt from the republican party. He will not openly identify himself with the third party as yet but his sympathies are with it—as everybody supposed. In two years from now, when the present hysteria has subsided, Mr. Crawford will be just as insistent that he never bolted. 17

Eighteen days later, this same newspaper announced, on its own authority, on the front page that Crawford was a Bull Mooser who would tour the nation campaigning for party deserters. Although the Argus-Leader would have preferred Taft, had there been a Republican electoral ticket in South Dakota, the editors, compelled to choose between Roosevelt and Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey, the Democratic presidential nominee, endorsed the latter.

During an interview with a news correspondent in early September, Crawford talked candidly about the political situation in his state. He excoriated Taft's managers at the Republican convention for "fraudulently and illegally forcing the nomination

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 10 Aug. 1912, p. 4.
Ibid., 28 Aug. 1912.

of Taft" by unseating delegates in certain states who were pledged to Roosevelt. Claiming that progressive Republicanism in South Dakota would not suffer under a Roosevelt administration, he also contended that all Republicans should abide by the wish of the majority of voters in the party's primary. (While pursuing this argument, Crawford used the occasion to snap at "the old irreconcilable corporation crowd" for its efforts to regain control of the G.O.P. in South Dakota and restore the machine and boss.) Because the conservatives were using their defeat in the primary as an excuse to vote for Wilson, Crawford argued that they should not accuse him of leaving the party. "It is of no use," he said, "to try to read me out of the republican party. Progressive republicanism appeals to me more strongly than ever. It is too good to leave, particularly in South Dakota." 19

Crawford also explained that all Republicans, whether stalwart or progressive, who were legally nominated in the primary should be favored by the party in the general election. In other words, he was willing to give loyal Republican stalwarts the full support of the party. Unfortunately, Crawford's reasoning did not convince the conservatives, for an editorial in the Daily Huronite on 4 September, the day of the publication of his interview, described the Senator as, among other things, "a combined republican-bull-moosie." A week later, the editors commented that the South Dakota factions of Republicanism had reached "the parting of the ways" and that there would be "no

further overtures for a settlement of differences."21

Unable to conceal their abhorrence of the Progressive campaign, approximately two hundred and fifty conservative supporters of Taft gathered in Mitchell, South Dakota, on 19 and 20 September to lodge an official protest. Meeting at the Gale Theatre, the delegates chose Charles M. Day, editor of the Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, as chairman of the convention. Senator Gamble also attended and delivered an address. The conservative spokesmen then passed a resolution that read: "That we condemn the action of Governor Vessey [and] Senator Crawford...in escorting and supporting the Bull Moose candidate for Vice President through this state in his campaign against the republican national nominees." They further resolved that Crawford was not in principle or heart a Republican, deplored his actions, and re-

^{19.} Daily Huronite, 4 Sept. 1912.

^{20.} Ibid.

^{21.} Ibid., 13 Sept. 1912.

ferred to the "incompetent and irresponsible element" as

creating party anarchy.22

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The emotion of the progressive-conservative campaign intensified in October. For one thing, Crawford crisscrossed the state for Roosevelt. These speaking engagements inflamed to a greater degree the political fury on both sides. The editors of the Daily Huronite, for example, went so far in their denunciation of Crawford as to question the moral right of an official elected by a party to leave that organization before the expiration of his term. Maintaining that Crawford's position was "untenable under any process of analysis," this Republican newspaper, which endorsed the Democratic electors for president, censured Crawford's "rule of consistency." The conservatives interpreted his stand to mean that it was wrong "for republicans to vote against candidates who have left their party and right for bolters to seek the defeat of republicans who refuse to leave their party." 23

Four days after this editorial, Senator Gamble, a supporter of Taft, wrote to Charles D. Hilles, chairman of the Republican National Committee, and delineated the situation in South Dakota. "The feeling is very intense among Republicans," he observed, "and it is their purpose at every hazard to defeat Roosevelt, and I am confident the Wilson electors will be successful in South Dakota." Gamble also pleaded with the national committee to assist the conservative Republicans in his state, but he carefully extricated himself from an expensive proposition. He remarked: "I will be entirely willing to do my part but I feel I sacrificed quite enough in the preliminary campaign, for which I have not yet been reimbursed, without assuming additional obligations." 24

Unknown to Gamble or Crawford, Hilles sent a letter to President Taft on 11 October. In this report, he outlined a clandestine maneuver designed to increase Taft's chances in the electoral col-

lege. He wrote:

I think I have matters in such shape that I can get a confidential written agreement, through the candidate for Governor, from every candidate for Presidential elector in South Dakota, that if you have more electoral votes than Roosevelt, they will vote for you in the College. Of course, we could not countenance a compromise of this character in the early stages of the campaign, but it seems to me advisable to do so now that it cannot be utilized by other States as a precedent.²⁵

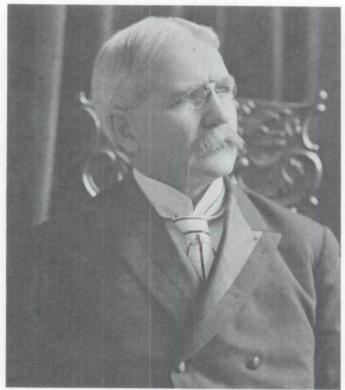
 $^{22.\} Sioux\ Falls\ Daily\ Argus-Leader,$ 20 Sept. 1912. See also New York Times, 21 Sept. 1912, p. 4.

^{23.} Daily Huronite, 7 Oct. 1912.

^{24.} Gamble to Charles D. Hilles, 11 Oct. 1912, Taft Papers.

^{25.} Hilles to Taft, 11 Oct. 1912, Taft Papers.

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Robert J. Gamble

On 5 November, the campaign of 1912 came to a close. Wilson was elected president, receiving 6,293,454 popular votes to Roosevelt's 4,119,538 and Taft's 3,484,980. The new president captured an overwhelming margin of victory in the electoral college, for he accumulated 435 electoral votes from forty states to 88 votes for Roosevelt and 8 for Taft. The defeated president won only Vermont and Utah. Roosevelt carried South Dakota by approximately 10,000 votes, and its 5 electoral votes were added to his column along with those of five other states. Although the combined popular vote for Roosevelt and Taft was larger than that for Wilson, the total popular vote for the two progressive candidates, Wilson and Roosevelt, far exceeded Taft's showing. Moreover, the progressive candidate for governor of South

Dakota, Frank M. Byrne, narrowly won the state's highest executive office.²⁶

For Crawford, the position that South Dakota held in the election results represented a progressive victory with which he could be pleased. Taft had been defeated both regionally and nationally; Old Guard Republicans failed to carry the state for Wilson; and progressive Republicans, having performed better at the polls than conservatives, would surely have their reputation and power in party affairs enhanced for future contests. In the end, the Democratic administration would revitalize the period of reform that Roosevelt had begun a decade earlier.

The national election returns delighted the editors of the *Daily Huronite*. In an editorial on 6 November, this newspaper reported: "The defeat of Roosevelt makes it possible for the republican party to reorganize itself. Had he been elected, republicanism would have become a matter of history. The party can now place itself upon a broad platform... and in four years atone for the defeat that was forced upon it by the treachery of a leader, aided by a concourse of deluded followers."²⁷

Crawford's position during the campaign of 1912 was often misunderstood. There was no doubt that he strongly favored having Roosevelt elected to a third term of occupancy in the White House. Although he supported the Rough Rider, he did not join the third party. Rather, he retained his allegiance to the G.O.P. Many Republicans who held progressive ideas found themselves in a quandary that year, and Crawford was no exception. His progressive neighbors to the north and Republican colleagues in the Senate also experienced a difficult situation. Senator Asle Jorgenson Gronna of North Dakota supported Wilson in 1912. while Senator Henry Clay Hansbrough of the same state vehemently denounced Roosevelt on the issue of giant monopolies and endorsed Taft for reelection.28 Because the voters of South Dakota had to choose between Wilson and Roosevelt and because the progressives controlled the party machinery of the G.O.P. in that state, Crawford could support Roosevelt while re-

^{26.} Joseph Nathan Kane, Facts About the Presidents: A Compilation of Biographical and Historical Data (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1959), p. 187; Schell, History of South Dakota, p. 264.

^{27.} Daily Huronite, 6 Nov. 1912.

^{28.} Leonard Schlup, "Political Maverick: Senator Hansbrough and Republican Party Politics, 1907-1912," North Dakota History 45, no. 4 (Fall 1978): 32-39.

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Coe I. Crawford in his law office.

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maining officially within the Republican party and using his office as a vehicle to generate enthusiasm for the cause of reform.

South Dakota stalwarts sought revenge for Crawford's refusal to endorse Taft. Their opportunity to strike back came in the 1914 senatorial primary. Congressman Burke defeated the incumbent senator in that contest, but Burke in turn lost the general election to Edwin S. Johnson, the Democratic challenger. When Crawford's single term as Senator ended in March 1915, he returned to his law practice in Huron. There he eventually retired from political and business activities in 1934. Ten years later, he suffered a heart attack and died in a hospital in Yankton, South Dakota, on 25 April 1944, 29 leaving behind him a legacy of progressive reform in South Dakota.

29. New York Times, 26 Apr. 1944, p. 19.

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