

POLITICS IN MY LIFETIME

Elmer A. Benson



AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED from the generality of its title, *Minnesota History* publishes a wide variety of subjects pertaining to the state's past. Among the many fields it covers is politics — albeit without overdoing it — in part because Minnesota has an especially interesting and significant political history. A political piece that drew considerable attention appeared in the Fall, 1978, issue — novelist Frederick Manfred's memoir of Hubert Horatio Humphrey. Very favorable to HHH, it focused mainly on his first, and unsuccessful, campaign — that of 1943 for mayor of Minneapolis.

On the following pages is a combination reminiscence and essay by one of Minnesota's foremost radicals and a one-time governor of the state. Among other things, it presents a completely different view of Humphrey than Manfred did. In fact, the Manfred article in part prompted Elmer A. Benson's, along with nudging of such friends as historian James M. Youngdale, now teaching at Mankato State University, who has written an "afternote" to Benson's essay that starts on page 160. Youngdale has published an anthology from midwestern populists, *Third Party Footprints*, and has written an interpretive study, *Populism: A Psychohistorical Perspective*.

Elmer A. Benson, now eighty-five, lives in Appleton, Minnesota, his home town and birthplace. A lawyer, banker, businessman, and Farmer-Labor political figure, Benson served as state securities commissioner in 1933, as state commissioner of banks, 1933–35, as United States senator for a year (1935–36, filling out the term of Thomas D. Schall), and governor of Minnesota, 1937–39. In recent years he has farmed in partnership with his son and has been active in the American Agricultural Movement.

AS I LOOK AT the present state of political understanding, both in Minnesota and in the nation, I am alarmed over the disintegration of the progressive tradition from which I emerged in the 1920s and 1930s and, by the same token, with the bankrupt politics of the present. The contrast is so striking that I feel compelled to offer a few observations about what has happened within our American political life from one period to the other, with special reference to my own experience in Minnesota.

Our Farmer-Labor party was founded by socialists who were active in the Farmers' Nonpartisan League and the Working People's Nonpartisan Political League, both of which were formed during the 1910–20 decade. Many nonsocialists joined the movement, too; hence I

DURING A CAMPAIGN the gubernatorial candidate waved from the rear platform of the "elect Benson governor" special train.

0026-5497/80/0016-154 \$01.75/0

say that the Farmer-Labor party was a special coalition, always with a key role for the socialists. It was Howard Y. Williams, a socialistic Congregational minister, who wrote the famous 1934 Farmer-Labor platform calling for an end to the capitalistic system and its replacement with a co-operative commonwealth. I am quite satisfied that it was socialists who did most of the day-by-day organizing, as was also the case earlier with the Nonpartisan League. After the Communist party adopted its "popular front" position in 1936, many communists also became active in mass movements, especially in the formation of the Committee (later, Congress) of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and in the strike activity of that time.

While I was governor of Minnesota, I came in contact with communist leaders active in farm and labor movements. One of these I came to know was Clarence Hathaway, who was expelled from the Communist party for alcoholism. As I am a prohibitionist and one who believes that alcohol and other drugs are no solution to personal or social problems, I am troubled by the popularity of this kind of escapism in our country, and I think the communists set a good example. In any event, Hathaway reformed and became the business agent for one of the CIO unions in Minneapolis. My larger point here is simply that radicals of many kinds were included in the political process in those days and helped influence policy decisions.

The same observations about radical influence can be made about the New Deal under Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, Roosevelt also had to contend with reactionary southern Democrats and with military leaders on the far right, so there was always a good deal of floundering within the New Deal as FDR kept trying to compromise and to please everyone within his coalition. We did make gains under the New Deal but only by being tough with Roosevelt when necessary to bring our weight to bear against the far right within the Democratic party.

In this regard, I joined a number of other governors — including Herbert H. Lehman of New York, Henry Horner of Illinois, and Philip F. La Follette of Wisconsin — in pleading with Roosevelt, Harry L. Hopkins, head of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., to continue public works spending in 1937 at a time when some of the economic experts had advised the president that the depression was ending and that spending cutbacks were in order. But we lost out to the "experts," and the economy promptly went into a man-made recession. A thorn in my side when I was governor was Victor A. Christgau, a right-wing, former Republican congressman who directed the WPA program in Minnesota and had ambitions to switch to the Democrats and run for governor against me. In spite of these negative observations about Roosevelt and the New Deal, I realize that radicals — both socialists and, in the late 1930s, communists

when they were influential within the CIO — did play a role within the larger coalition. And Roosevelt did enunciate a vision of peace and social progress for the postwar world. But I always had doubts about him because he had the idea that he could appoint some reactionary person to administer a social program and then use personal charm to get the reactionary to perform well. This did not work. Charm is useful in affairs of the heart but not in politics.

AN ISSUE of growing importance during the 1930s was foreign policy, as the clouds of European war finally blacked out peace in the world. I have always felt that every dollar spent for war and every life lost are a waste and a tragedy to be avoided if humanly possible. My predecessor as governor, Floyd B. Olson, and I made a pledge with each other that, as long as we lived, we would always speak for peace and against war in every major statement we might articulate. I have always tried to keep this pledge with Olson, so that I have been called an isolationist and given other labels even less complimentary. My isolationism, though, was not the same as the America First variety on the right, some of which was openly in admiration of the Hitler system. We had some pro-Hitler isolationists even within the Farmer-Labor party, and some within the Progressive party of Wisconsin, but the great majority of the Farmer-Labor members were anti-Hitler, realizing that this man and Mussolini were leaders of a totalitarian version of capitalism.

SENATOR BENSON greeted Senator Robert M. La Follette (left) and Governor Philip La Follette (right), both of Wisconsin, on August 26, 1936, at the funeral of Governor Floyd B. Olson of Minnesota.



A MATTER OF PRIDE for the Farmer-Labor tradition was the stand of Congressman John T. Bernard of Eveleth who cast the lone vote on January 6, 1937, against a "neutrality" measure, a resolution to prohibit the sale of munitions to either side in the Spanish civil war. In effect, the act, when passed, denied United States money and arms to republican (Loyalist) Spain while Fascist rebel forces led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco freely took aid from the governments of Adolf Hitler of Germany and Benito Mussolini of Italy. In 1938 the Farmer-Labor party was divided by these two forms of isolationism when I was challenged in the primary election by the right-wing forces within the party. I have no apology to make for my position or for that of Bernard even though we were smeared for associating with the communist popular front point of view. I am satisfied that the course of world history would have been quite different if the United States government had shown the courage of John Bernard in 1937. It is said that Roosevelt, in private conversation, paid tribute to Bernard two years later after appeasement of German aggression was seen, too late, as a fatal mistake.¹

In reality, the debate in the 1930s was not between isolationism and interventionism at all but between two kinds of internationalism. One was willing to let Hitler have his way in Europe and Russia, with the hope of making a deal with him, and the other placed top priority on stopping German aggression. My own bias was with the latter outlook both in regard to the civil war in Spain and my supporting a larger air force while I was in the United States Senate.

While I was governor in 1938, I bluntly told Phil La Follette that I was not interested when he and St. Paul millionaire Charley Ward tried to inveigle me into joining their National Progressive third party, which was launched with much fanfare and flags and with a symbol that resembled a swastika at a time when I knew that La Follette displayed an autographed picture of Mussolini on his desk. Along with many Americans at that time, I was opposed to getting involved in a European war, especially in light of the findings of the Nye Committee about how we got into World War I.² I was not interested, however, in falling in line with the America First people.

AGAIN TODAY there are two kinds of internationalism. One supports reactionary regimes all over the world — regimes that play ball with our multinational corporations — and the other views revolutions against these regimes as a necessary step toward reform and democracy in the long run. Our bipartisan, cold-war foreign policy since the death of Roosevelt in 1945 has, of course, been almost exclusively the reactionary form of internationalism, a policy which led us into unnecessary

wars in Korea and Vietnam, presumably to contain Communist China. The tragic irony is that now we are dealing openly with China in a turnabout after our wanton destruction in Korea and Vietnam. This would not have happened with a different foreign policy in the first place.

After Roosevelt's death, American politics made a drastic shift commonly referred to as the era of "containing communism" at home and abroad, with McCarthyism on one hand and the wars in Korea and Vietnam on the other. Often we fail to note that a new political coalition emerged in America with the new cold-war policies. With the help of the FBI and the CIA, this coalition excluded radicals totally with hysterical headlines in newspapers about alleged dangers of radicalism. The hysteria was so bad that many people thought the Declaration of Independence was a communist document! At the same time, the new coalition included the far right along with some former America Firsters who had admired Hitler and Mussolini and also included new superpatriots with illusions of an omnipotent United States running the world in "The American Century" — to borrow a 1946 editorial title from *Life* magazine.

I have at times referred to John Foster Dulles and others who spawned the cold-war mentality as fascists, a term I think useful for describing the outlook of some cold-war political leaders in our country. There may be many who prefer not to look at fascist tendencies in America. They prefer to sweep such discussion under the rug and not use the word fascist. But let us face the fact that we did have concentration camps here for eleven years along with lists of people to be imprisoned in case of "national emergency." Also let us face the fact that our incursions into Korea and Vietnam can be described as similar to Mussolini's war against Ethiopia in 1935 and Hitler's invasion of Austria in 1938. These may be unpleasant facts for Americans to remember, but a failure to face these realities may well pave the way for new forms of fascist behavior in the future.

AT THE ROOT of our intellectual bankruptcy in politics has been the fact that these fascist tendencies have been built into the bipartisan, cold-war coalition which has

¹On Bernard's congressional career, see Barbara Stuhler, "The One Man Who Voted 'Nay': The Story of John T. Bernard's Quarrel with Foreign Policy, 1937-1939," in *Minnesota History*, 43:82-92 (Fall, 1972).

²Claims that munitions makers were "merchants of death" and a major cause of World War I and other conflicts came in 1935-36 before the United States Senate's Special Committee Investigating the Munitions Industry. Chaired by Senator Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota, the committee failed to establish munitions producers as a major cause of war, but the investigation fanned growing isolationist sentiment in the late 1930s. See James A. Huston, "Munitions," in *Dictionary of American History*, 4:433 (Revised ed., New York, 1976).

managed the affairs of this country since Harry S Truman became president. Many people live with the illusion that these tendencies are evident only in small-cult movements, such as the Ku Klux Klan or the John Birch Society. Nothing could be further from the truth. Obviously, these cult groupings attract hate-filled bigots who often behave like bullies, but more insidious are the polite fascists within the bipartisan coalition who often operate as “moderates” or “liberals.” I want to call special attention to the latter because their role is often overlooked and they tend to mask their outlook with humanitarian talk which sounds like populism. Many persons in American politics illustrate my contentions here but none as well as the “cold-war liberal” I observed closely for some thirty years — Hubert H. Humphrey.

First of all, let me speak to a certain myth about Humphrey: the idea that he founded the Democratic Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota. This is a falsehood. He was never a part of the Farmer-Labor party that was a dominant force in Minnesota in the 1930s. In 1943 he was defeated in his first campaign, the Minneapolis mayoralty race; otherwise he was unknown in Minnesota at that time. It was apparent to many of us that Humphrey was trying to win the favor of conservative forces in the state. One sign of this was that General Mills, Inc. (Wheaties) placed him on its payroll as a radio commentator for a time during the war years. It was no surprise, then, that General Mills announced the production of a movie in 1978 lauding Humphrey’s leadership.³ At the same time, he began attacking me and other “radicals”; yet he claimed to endorse the New Deal tradition and thus won support from the Communist party and from left-wing CIO unions much influenced by the communists when he ran again for mayor and was elected in 1945.

In 1944 the weak Democratic party and the strong Farmer-Laborites merged with much urging from the White House and with concurrence from me and from certain Democrats, especially Judge Theodore Slen, national committeeman from Madison, Minnesota, and Oscar Ewing, vice-chairman of the national Democratic party. Some of the Democrats associated with State Chairman Elmer Kelm dragged their feet, and it was only the presence of Ewing that caused the merger to take place. At first I was ambivalent as I recalled my many disappointments with Roosevelt for capitulating too often to the far right in both domestic and foreign policy. Finally, however, I did become convinced that the merger would make possible a renewal of progressive politics and victories in Minnesota. The only

³Entitled “They Just Call Me Humphrey,” the 25-minute film was coproduced by General Mills and the Closeup Foundation of Washington, D.C.



BENSON SERVED as national cochairman of the Progressive party led by Henry A. Wallace (right) in 1948. Wallace’s presidential effort failed.

Farmer-Laborites who actively opposed the merger were Victor Lawson and Susie Stageberg, both of whom had a long history of participating in populist movements and especially in the Prohibition party prior to World War I. (Lawson was a long-time Farmer-Labor state senator from Kandiyohi County, and Stageberg was well known for often repeating a slogan from the prohibition movement — “hate the sin, but love the sinner.”) In retrospect, I am now sorry we failed to pay attention to Lawson and Stageberg. I think the merger was a mistake.

In 1946 the DFL state convention voted for progressive leadership, electing Harold H. Barker, a small-town newspaper publisher from Elbow Lake, Minnesota, and former speaker of the Minnesota house of representatives, as state chairman. We won control against Humphrey’s efforts to promote as chairman J. E. McKenna, an ultraconservative from the old Democratic party. One move in 1946 was a mistake — permitting a young law student named Orville L. Freeman to become the DFL party secretary, a position from which he was able to emerge as the spokesman for the Humphrey faction. (This was the same Freeman who later became a disappointing secretary of agriculture under President John F. Kennedy.) We ran excellent candidates for the offices of governor (Harold Barker) and United States senator (Theodore Jorgenson) in 1946 but lost in part because of sabotage from the National Democratic Committee, with the connivance of Humphrey, through whom NDC funding for the campaign was funneled.

In 1948 the Henry A. Wallace campaign for president emerged. I agreed with the assessment that Harry Truman had taken a turn to the right. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, always a reactionary southern Democrat, started the cold-war talk against Russia at a time

when Russia was prostrate from World War II and a threat to no one. Byrnes successfully demanded that Truman dismiss Wallace as secretary of commerce after Wallace spoke out for a continuation of wartime cooperation with Russia. Then, too, Truman used the army for strike-breaking. Also, his secretary of agriculture, Clinton P. Anderson, was an early advocate of “flexible parity” — a method for bankrupting farmers with low farm prices so that food processors and exporters could profiteer without seeming to raise consumer prices unduly. I knew Truman well, having sat beside him on the United States Senate floor. I talked with him several times in the White House about the direction his administration was taking — all to no avail.

When invited, I accepted the position of national cochairman of the Henry Wallace Progressive party in 1948. It was unfortunate that the effort failed. Just as I argued that world history would have been vastly different if John Bernard’s position before World War II had been adopted, I am satisfied, too, that subsequent history would have been far different and better if Wallace’s vision had been followed by America after 1948 instead of the cold-war anticommunism that was foisted upon this country by Byrnes and John Foster Dulles, by many corporate reactionaries, and by plenty of “liberals,” to boot — all of them being unable to see the debacle “at the end of the tunnel” in Vietnam. I am aware that “counting communists” in the Henry Wallace movement is a favorite pastime of many intellectuals these days. They can do this if they like, but the tragedy was not the “communist count” but finally the “body count” in Vietnam. I do not want to give the impression that communists and other radicals are always right; but I do object to the implicit notion, after cold-war anticommunism has become our official ideology, that radicals are always wrong. And I do object to intellectuals who “count communists” to the exclusion of evaluating policies.

Cold-war anticommunism flowered at the time Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin headed a Senate subcommittee that investigated communists in government service (1950–54) — hence the term, “McCarthyism.” But McCarthy was a johnny-come-lately. The anticommunist mentality flourished first in “liberal” organizations like the CIO and Farmers’ Union and within the Democratic party when Truman initiated loyalty oaths and purges in the federal government. Many “liberals” joined the chorus of anticommunism and finally in the crusade supporting petty dictators in Korea and Vietnam.

Let me again use Hubert Humphrey to illustrate my point. He was first elected to the United States Senate in 1948, partly on the strength of his “let the sunshine in” civil rights speech at the Democratic national convention in Philadelphia. However, in 1950, he unfurled the flag

of fascism as the chief author of the Detention Camp Act as a substitute bill for the Mundt-Nixon bill which Humphrey called “the cream-puff special.” Truman, to his credit, vetoed the bill, but it was passed over the veto with support from such “liberals” as Harley Kilgore, Wayne Morse, and Paul Douglas along with the entire Democratic leadership, including Vice-President Alben W. Barkley and house leader John W. McCormack. Again in 1954 it was Humphrey, along with John F. Kennedy and Wayne Morse, who led an effort to make simple membership in the Communist party a crime under the Communist Control Act of that year. These “liberals” withdrew this attempt to violate the Constitution only when President Eisenhower threatened to veto the act if the provision were included.

I am certain I have seen references by Eisenhower to the famous statement by Martin Niemöller, German anti-Nazi Protestant leader, which goes something like this: “ first they put the Communists and the Jehovah’s Witnesses in concentration camps, but I was not a Communist or a Jehovah’s Witness so I did nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat so I did nothing. Then they arrested the trade unionists, but I did nothing because I was not one. Then they arrested the Jews but again I did nothing because I was not Jewish. Then they came for Catholics, but I was not Catholic so I did nothing again. At last they came and arrested me, but by then it was too late.”

ONE CAN CONTINUE at much more length about the miserable record of Democratic party “liberals,” especially regarding their roles as super-salesmen of war in Korea and Vietnam, but this is all well known and needs no more elaboration. Many ordinary people in America have been ambivalent about war as a moral issue, in part because they have imagined that war spending provides jobs and is good for the economy, not realizing that the money and energy used by nations to maintain armies and navies is a total waste. Generally, foreign policy is made in think-tank circles, whose people should be held responsible. It is too bad that we as a nation have lacked the moral will to bring war-crime charges against certain of our leaders under the Nuremberg laws for our role in Vietnam. John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles, for example, should have been brought to trial while they lived for their role in escalating cold-war divisions in the world and in promoting brinkmanship, always with danger of setting off an atomic holocaust. Many cold-war liberals likewise should be considered war criminals for being propagandists, if for no other reason. It is true that we filed charges against Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., and found him guilty in March, 1971, of murdering unarmed civilians at My Lai, Vietnam, three years earlier — but this was a minor case. The entire war in

Vietnam was an atrocity. We dropped more bombs on little Vietnam than were used in all of World War II over all of Europe. On top of that we destroyed vast acreages of forest with chemicals (Agent Orange) which cause both cancer and genetic damage in people. I am certain that the United States will never regain its former standing in the world until we admit our guilt and ask for forgiveness for warring on a nation of peasants.

Earlier, I expressed concern about the new kind of political coalition that emerged since the second "big red scare" known as McCarthyism. The new politics, I have argued, has excluded a role for the radical left in any form and has opened the door for the far right, including those with fascist tendencies, as a part of so-called bipartisan politics.

The November 11, 1978, issue of *The Nation* carried an article, "The Market for Potted Expertise," in which the role of the Operations and Policy Research ("think tank") committee was discussed. The author documented the fact that the OPR was a funnel for CIA money to various and nefarious cold-war projects on the part of university intellectuals. An interesting thing about this OPR committee is that the CIA funds were channeled through the Andreas Foundation of Minneapolis and that OPR was directed by Max Kampelman and Evron Kirkpatrick — leading political science professors who were part of Humphrey's inner circle early in his career. Dwayne O. Andreas, of course, is well known as a long-time financial angel for Humphrey and also for Nixon in that it was an Andreas \$25,000 check laundered through Mexico City that helped unravel Watergate.

It is not my intention here to carp about Humphrey as an individual. As with other "liberals," he accepted the guns-and-butter version of cold-war "liberalism," a policy position which meant mostly guns and very little butter — and very little achievement of social programs, even though many of them have held out much promise of social reform. As a consequence of the failure of liberalism, which is offering high taxes with much war spending and little reform, many voters have turned to overtly reactionary candidates, thus jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Again this tendency has been most clear in Minnesota. In the winter of 1977, Republican Arlen Stangland was elected to take Robert Bergland's congressional seat in my own district even though Vice-President Walter F. Mondale and other leading Democratic "warhorses" campaigned vigorously for the DFL candidate. This 1977 election was a foretaste of 1978 when almost the entire liberal DFL ticket was routed by Republicans. I doubt that there will be much comfort for voters who have shifted from conservative liberalism to conservative conservatism. In any event, the shift does speak for profound disillusionment with traditional liberalism gone sour.

LET ME RETURN to my point that a fascist current prevails within our much-hailed bipartisan political consensus. It is true that we have no storm troopers on a mass scale — just harassment of a Martin Luther King by the FBI, or use of local police to destroy the antiwar demonstrations in Chicago in 1968, or the utilization of state highway patrolmen to break up farmer protests against high-voltage power lines in Minnesota during recent years. It is true that we have no crematoria for mass destruction of some given ethnic group, but our government did execute the Rosenbergs, Julius and Ethel, in 1953 in highly questionable proceedings as a warning to dissenters. Our fascist tendencies are well established in principle. The seeds are planted and need only to find the proper crisis environment for germination and growth. Perhaps some have sprouted more than we realize.

It is time to recognize that radicals have been systematically excluded from the American political process for the past thirty years to the point that a new generation of voters and politicians is unaware that we have a radical history in our country and that they are a part of a center/far right coalition while believing themselves to be "liberals." It is common to complain that politics has degenerated into public relations gimmickry. On the opposite side of this coin, there is ignorance of grass roots protest movements which keep proliferating in our cities and on our farms. Not only are these movements unknown but their leaders rarely are given staff positions with a governor, or a congressman, or a United States senator, all of whom seem to prefer public relations experts as their advisers. It is no surprise, then, that many voters become disillusioned with cold-war "liberals" with their TV slogans and vote instead for "free enterprise" Republicans and, paradoxically, even for more cold-war spending.

Out of these political trends we are getting increased military appropriations and calls for reinstatement of the peacetime military draft. This is alarming. In 1919, another person and I led a fight against a resolution favoring peacetime conscription at the founding convention of the Minnesota American Legion in St. Paul. The other person was Sam Lipschultz, later a prominent attorney in this state. When Sam was speaking, a heckler asked him whether anyone ever attacks a prizefighter. "Of course, another prizefighter," Sam shot back. As of today there are three prizefighters in the ring: the United States, Russia, and China, all three acting drunk with power as escalation toward war goes forward. The United States, I think, is the most drunk of all with its power to destroy every person in the world forty times over. And many ordinary people go along with our Pentagon militarists, maybe because most Americans do not really know what war is all about in that recent conflicts have been fought in Europe or Asia, far away from home.

But another war fought with nuclear weapons would rapidly put our entire industrial economy out of commission, leaving survivors to scavenge in our garbage deposits. We had better realize this before it is too late.

The challenge before us is to include again a radical presence within our political processes and debates, with sharper attention to solutions for major crises around such goals as tax equality, halting inflation, stabilizing our farm economy, and achieving full employment. We must go beyond the old New Deal in our reform imagination. I have no easy suggestion for restoring such a radical presence into our political process. I can find things to criticize, I am sure, in the behavior and attitude of many, if not all, radical groups, but this does not alter

the larger need for including them. Failure to come to grips with this problem is apt to mean a continuation, by default, of the center/far right coalition, always with the danger of overt fascism emerging, in the name of “liberalism,” out of some serious crisis. Sinclair Lewis wrote a novel on this very matter in the 1930s. The ironic title was *It Can't Happen Here* (1935). The point in the book was that, if fascism comes to the United States, it will arrive disguised as “Americanism” and will be supported by well-meaning people. Lewis’ warning is still valid.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS with this article are all from the MHS audio-visual library. The one of Benson and the La Follettes appeared in the *St. Paul Daily News*, August 26, 1936.

AFTERNOTE

A Call for New Avenues of Scholarship

James M. Youngdale

OVER THE PAST several years, Governor Benson has complained that “political reality” in Minnesota, as described by various historians and political scientists, has been at variance with his own experience with this “reality.” Consequently, a number of persons, including myself, have urged him to present his own view of Minnesota political history during his lifetime. The foregoing essay is the fruition of these urgings. While reading Benson’s observations, one should keep in mind that they are colored by a philosophical discord — the sharp polarization, after World War II, between the more radical Farmer-Labor tradition and the emerging coalition of cold-war liberals headed by Hubert H. Humphrey. Also, Benson’s views were put down before the recent elections, so there are no references to it.

From a historian’s point of view, Benson’s observations are nevertheless timely, for they appear at the beginning of a decade in which cold-war liberalism (historians call it “progressivism”) is waning and under attack both from “cold-war conservatism” on the right and a “peace progressivism” on the left. Benson, with personal roots both in the Robert M. La Follette, Sr., peace tradition and in the Debsian Socialist approach, continues to reflect in this essay a form of peace progressivism increasingly visible in American life. In the 1930s this outlook would have been called isolationist. At that time, however, the meaning of the term was ambiguous, as it

included those who were prone to admire the German system of “law and order” as well as others who disliked militarism and feared that New Deal reforms would be destroyed by a war economy. In any event, Benson makes clear that he opposed the right-wing version of isolationism found to a large extent within the America First movement.

Heretofore, much scholarly work about the Farmer-Labor movement has reflected a bias of cold-war liberalism, aiming to an extent to discredit the Farmer-Labor tradition because of Communist participation within its ranks at certain points in time. Notably, there are the widely quoted doctoral theses by Arthur E. Nafatalin and by John E. Haynes and the recent book, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative*, by Millard L. Gieske.¹ It is quite true that the Communist party was involved in various populist movements and the labor movement, especially during the popular front period in the late 1930s. A preoccupation with the communist issue, however, has eclipsed other consid-

¹ Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, 1979). In the preface (p. viii) the author notes with approval the Democratic party strategy to bide time in taking over or diminishing the Farmer-Labor party. Gieske only criticizes the Democrats for lack of courage and skill in co-opting or destroying the Farmer-Labor party.

erations about the Farmer-Labor movement that deserve attention as well.

Various intellectual currents within the Farmer-Labor party, for example, have lacked sufficient study. These include rightist tendencies for which I have adopted the term, tory populism.² It was in terms of this rightist current — really nostalgia for the golden age of small-scale capitalism sometimes called Jacksonian ideology — that Richard Hofstadter misread populism as a totally reactionary force in his book, *The Age of Reform* (1955). Tory populism, as one aspect of larger movements, makes understandable how United States Senator Henrik Shipstead could leave the Farmer-Labor party in 1940 and be elected as a Republican. Nostalgia for a lost golden age has been endemic in American culture and within both the Democratic and Republican parties, and it has been easy for persons in this particular intellectual current to display racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of hatred as people have felt powerless to restore a lost American dream. These forms of scapegoatism did crop up in Farmer-Labor circles, notably in the person of United States Senator Ernest Lundeen, who developed an open affinity with the Nazi cause before he was killed in a plane crash in 1940.

As a further consequence of the preoccupation with the communist issue in Minnesota, scholars have failed to examine fully the nature of the political coalition inherent in the Farmer-Labor movement. They have not been aware enough of the role of ethnic and religious movements, along with co-operative, farm, and labor organizations, that helped build the Farmer-Labor movement. By the same token, too little study has been made of the divisions and defections within these movements as certain issues on national and international levels caused fractures in the Farmer-Labor coalition.

For example, German ethnicity might be of special interest because evidence suggests that the ranks of the emerging Farmer-Labor coalition were swelled by many Germans who identified with the oblique criticisms of United States involvement in World War I by the socialist-influenced Nonpartisan League. And it appears that many German Farmer-Laborites defected from the party before World War II when Benson adopted an anti-Hitler position, thus accounting in part for the party's defeat in 1938.

Another aspect of the Farmer-Labor coalition lacking sufficient study is the tactic, begun by Governor Floyd B. Olson, of an organization known as the "All-Party Committee" that brought rather conservative persons

from both the Democratic and Republican ranks into Farmer-Labor circles. Again, the 1938 defeat may be seen in part as stemming from the defection of these all-party types when sharp polarization developed over labor and foreign policy issues. There is a certain irony in the fact that Benson himself came into prominence via the all-party route and that he was initially suspected of being a too-conservative banker from rural Minnesota.

THE FOREGOING observations offer a beginning toward possible new avenues of scholarship in regard to the Farmer-Labor movement. It is inexplicable that this movement has been so much ignored, both within Minnesota and on the national level. Southern populism of the 1880s and 1890s has received much attention, especially by such scholars as C. Vann Woodward and, more recently, Lawrence Goodwyn. Likewise, the La Follette tradition of Wisconsin has been the subject of many books and articles. Minnesota Farmer-Laborism deserves equal attention.

What I have said here is offered in the spirit of encouragement for new scholars to renew an interest in Minnesota history, especially with its Farmer-Labor party, the most successful radical third-party movement in United States history. I would suggest, however, that it was not really a third party. It emerged as a second party in the 1920s and the first party in the 1930s. During this time Minnesota was really a two-party state because the Democratic party was of little account except to be a "spoiler" until new life was pumped into it by virtue of the popularity of the New Deal on the federal level. This observation is consistent with my bias about the inherent tendency of United States politics to coalesce around a two-party system in that we have rejected the European parliamentary system with proportional representation for all parties on the political spectrum. My point here about the inherent disability for third parties to succeed in America is an example of a larger consideration: namely, the need to treat local history in a national, even international, context in terms of which interpretation flows. All grand notions about history are rooted in local history, and by the same token local history serves to illuminate grand theories about the historical process.

In encouraging new directions for scholarship, I am not suggesting that any approach can be "objective" or "value free" in contrast with the cold-war liberalism bias about which I complained initially. There is no such thing as "objective" history or social science. All scholars are men and women who live and interact in an everyday world; hence all have biases derived from their larger commitments or world views. A problem for scholars is to acknowledge and define their biases and to debate how these biases affect their scholarship. There is no Mount Olympus for scholars.

²The term, "tory populism," owes its inception to Carl H. Chrislock, professor of American history at Augsburg College, in his writings about Minnesota populism in the 1890s. I have found the concept useful in my own work for describing a conservative current within populist movements in contrast with currents I label "socialist" and "radical neo-mercantilist."



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).