

## EDITOR'S PAGE

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AUGUST 22 marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Floyd B. Olson, governor of Minnesota from 1931 to 1936, who in the judgment of many, myself among them, is the most extraordinary political leader Minnesota has produced to date. The Olson mystique is no doubt magnified by his death from cancer at age 44 as he was about to launch a national career that unquestionably would have carried him far.

Olson lore—highlighting his magnetism, oratory, humanity, courage, sex drive, alcoholism, intellect—is still to be found in abundance in all corners of the state. This collection of indelible memories of him illuminates the character, personality, and lasting imprint of a public figure possessing rare natural gifts whose personal flaws were tolerated sympathetically by Minnesotans. They elected him governor three times on a third-party ticket. A half century after his death, Olson remains a compelling and captivating leader during a time of the utmost economic and social stress. In 1964, the Minnesota Historical Society asked 32 teachers of Minnesota history and politics to name the state's five outstanding governors. Floyd B. Olson was far and away the first choice. My guess is that a poll today would reach a similar conclusion.

Journalist Eric Sevareid, a student at the University of Minnesota during Olson's governorship, was impressed by Olson's popularity with students and considered him a better speaker than Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the words of Arthur Naftalin, producer of a television series on governors who served since 1931, "the governorship of Floyd Olson remains a golden moment in Minnesota history." Stafford King, long-time Republican state auditor, elected to his first term at the same time Olson was elected to his, considered Olson a genius as a leader presiding over a broad coalition that stretched across the spectrum of Minnesota politics. King, in oral history interviews, described Olson as clearly the most outstanding of the ten governors with whom he served between 1931 and 1967. George A. Selke, university president and official in the Orville L. Freeman administration, praised Olson's first-rate intellect. Theodore S. Slen of Madison, Minnesota, a Democrat in the state senate during the early 1930s, emphasized Olson's empathy with the people. He never forgot who put him in office.

Standing 6 feet 2 inches, blue-eyed, handsome, virile, aggressive, Olson had the common touch with persons from all walks of life. Comfortable in meeting a mob of thousands who marched on the State Capitol and able to disarm their anger with uplifting oratory and a message of hope, he was equally at home in the company of wealthy friends and foes with whom he frequently mingled socially at country clubs and summer resorts.

Olson, originally a Democrat, went down to defeat as the Farmer-Labor party's standard-bearer for governor in 1924. He made a successful comeback in 1930, agreeing to accept the Farmer-Labor nomination for governor only if he were

allowed to write the platform. Olson's rhetoric was usually more radical than his actions; in fact, he largely ignored the radical planks of the 1930 platform. With his re-election in 1932, he effected a political alliance with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and thereafter his policies generally foreshadowed or reflected those of the New Deal. Despite hostile legislatures, Olson secured large appropriations for the relief of unemployment, a two-year moratorium on farm mortgage foreclosures, and old-age pensions; he implemented measures to conserve the environment and secured the state's first income tax law in 1933. His bold intervention in the 1933 Hormel strike and the violent Minneapolis truckers' strike a year later exhibited his uncommon skill at negotiation and forged a successful settlement between management and labor.

Olson's re-election to a third term in 1934—this time with strong backing from urban labor and reform forces—promised a more radical program. The Farmer-Labor party's 1934 platform, a startling document, proposed public ownership of all industry, banking, insurance, and public utilities, as well as the formation of a "co-operative commonwealth." Toward the end of his governorship, Olson's rural support dwindled but his strength in urban areas increased. His third term was a turbulent one, marred by strikes and intraparty fights, and hampered by a virtual deadlock in the legislature.

Harry H. Peterson, Olson's attorney-general, when asked "How much of the success of the Farmer-Labor party was due to Floyd Olson?" replied, "about 99 percent." He held together a tenuous coalition: workers, farmers, co-operatives, isolationists, socialists, prohibitionists, and progressives. Many of these citizens sought solutions outside of the two major parties for a better way to reform society; others were defectors from the Republican and Democratic parties or opponents of war—principally German and Scandinavian Americans. Olson led the most successful third party in American history to its greatest victories, drawing strength from and enlarging upon Minnesota's sturdy populist tradition.

At his death, there was an unparalleled outpouring of grief by the people of Minnesota. An estimated 200,000 filed by his bier at the State Capitol; the Minneapolis Auditorium was packed to capacity at his funeral; and thousands more listened at loudspeakers outside the building to Wisconsin Governor Philip F. La Follette's eulogy.

Olson offered hope to the victims of the Great Depression and championed a larger role for government, a political philosophy in retreat today. Many thought he was destined for the White House, and his untimely death invites endless speculation on what his future might have been as the war clouds gathered and the wartime effort replaced the reform crusade of the early years of the Great Depression.

The Farmer-Labor party he led brought about widespread citizen participation in political affairs and produced courageous leaders who crusaded for social justice. Its legacy—and Olson's—is a strong orientation of Minnesota voters toward social concerns, progressive reforms, high taxation for a high level of public services, and, above all, the issue-oriented and independent political tradition for which Minnesota is known.

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