THE MORNING OF January 2, 1917, a tall, conservatively dressed man with a receding hairline, still boyish-looking at 52, stood in the City Hall rotunda, quietly reciting the oath of office as mayor of Minneapolis. Thomas Van Lear may have appeared modest and self-effacing on that January morning, but his looks were deceiving. A powerful orator whose fiery speeches thrilled his supporters and outraged his opponents, Van Lear represented a sharp break in the city's political culture. He was not a businessman. He had been a skilled factory worker and union organizer before his election in 1916. But it was his political affiliation that most set him apart from his mainly Republican predecessors. Van Lear was an avowed Socialist, a label that greatly disturbed the city's conservative business leaders.

The city's newly elected chief executive was not wealthy and he was not a businessman. He had been a skilled factory worker and union organizer before his election in 1916. But it was his political affiliation that set him apart from his mainly Republican predecessors. Van Lear was an avowed Socialist, a label that greatly disturbed the city's conservative business leaders.

The new mayor had run for the city's highest office twice before, in 1910 and 1912. Both times he had come close to toppling the establishment's candidates. In 1916, when he finally won, Minneapolis had been the scene of a bitter strike by the machinists union, which had a polarizing effect on the city's electorate. That year, Van Lear's opponent, Hennepin County Sheriff Otto S. Langum, had the support of Minneapolis's business leaders, who were determined to beat back union-organizing efforts by the newly emboldened local labor movement. As the election campaign got underway, the strike galvanized labor support for Van Lear and his pledge to refrain from using the city's police officers as strikebreakers. He was able to broaden his appeal to other voters by vowing to rein in the city's two key public utilities—the street railway and gas companies—both of which had a major impact on daily life in Minneapolis.1

While the election debate in 1916 centered on unions and utilities, a new issue, extending far beyond the borders of Minneapolis, would cast a shadow over Van Lear's administration and lead to its abrupt end two years after it had begun. Minneapolis's Socialist mayor took office only months before the U.S. declared war on Germany. As war fever swept through the country during his first year in office, Van Lear found himself under attack from his political opponents who equated his ties to the anti-war Socialists with disloyalty that bordered on treason. Despite his efforts to keep the focus on his battle with the utilities, the loyalty issue would continue to trail him as he campaigned for reelection in 1918.

BORN IN MARYLAND IN 1869, Van Lear worked in the Appalachian coal mines as a young boy. At the age of 18, he joined the Knights of Labor, a fraternal group that had evolved into a national labor organization by the late 1800s. After a four-year stint in the U.S. Army, he moved to Minneapolis, where he trained to become a machinist. From the factory floor, he moved into both the local labor hierarchy and union organizing. He served the Minneapolis Trades and Labor Assembly, including as its president, and eventually became a business agent for the International Association of Machinists.2

As he moved up the union hierarchy, Van Lear used his organizing skills to energize the anemic local affiliate of the Socialist Party of America. Before 1910 the Socialist organization in Minneapolis was “little more than a skeleton,” according to historian David Paul Nord. “Van Lear and his followers put flesh on it.” Van Lear had joined the Socialist Party sometime before his first run for mayor in 1910. Unlike some fellow party members, his political outlook was characterized by pragmatism rather than by a rigid adherence to ideology. This pragmatism, Nord explained, enabled Van Lear to create broad-based coalitions as he pursued an electoral strategy in the years leading up to his successful campaign in 1916.

Nationally, the Socialist Party had gained a loyal following and nearly a million votes for its presidential candidate, Eugene Debs, in the election of 1912. Regionally and locally, Socialists were achieving some electoral successes in widely scattered labor strongholds while Van Lear was organizing in Minneapolis. Their first big win came in Milwaukee where a party loyalist, Emil Seidel, was elected mayor in 1910. Two years later, Minneapolis elected two Socialists to its City Council, both of them machinists in their first run for office. Over the next four years, the Socialists would have mayors in places like Butte, Montana, Berkeley, California, and Schenectady, New York.3

During this time, Van Lear used
powerful oratory to build a loyal following in Minneapolis’s working-class neighborhoods. While running, unsuccessfully, for a congressional seat in 1914, he told a group of enthusiastic supporters, “When fat, slick, well dressed men, who never missed a meal in their lives, come down here and tell you workingmen that you should be patient and satisfied with things as they are, I think you ought to tell them to go to hell!”

Two years later, on the day before the November 7 city election, the Minneapolis Tribune raised the specter of a Socialist takeover of City Hall. The paper maintained that Van Lear’s election would put the majority “in the hands of a secret, irresponsible, possibly non-citizen inner circle.” The next day, enough voters disregarded the Tribune’s warning to elect Van Lear, giving him 54 percent of the vote in his contest with Langum. In the nominally nonpartisan election, Langum was backed by the city’s Republicans and the powerful Citizens Alliance, a shadowy organization of local businessmen dedicated to keeping Minneapolis an open-shop, nonunion town.

Minneapolis’s left-leaning Labor Review was thrilled by Van Lear’s triumph. With the word “Victory” spread across the front page of its November 10 edition in the boldest possible type, the paper ran Abraham Lincoln’s quote: “Government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

The Minneapolis Journal, which had endorsed Langum, clearly did not share the Labor Review’s enthusiasm about the new mayor. In a November 8 editorial, the Journal maintained that “the heavy vote for Van Lear was a protest against the present municipal regime and a determination to bring about radical change. Mr. Van Lear was just the sort of candidate to appeal to that sentiment.” Then, with a note of skepticism, the Journal observed, “Perhaps the air will be cleared and the civic future of Minneapolis will be benefitted by the installation of a new sort of administration. At any rate, the people have decided to try that experiment.”

One local resident was quite distressed by the November 7 election that had returned a Democrat to the White House and brought a Socialist into City Hall. In a letter to Minnesota’s U.S. Senator Knute Nelson, John F. McGee, a prominent Minneapolis attorney and self-proclaimed “independent Republican,” complained that the results of the election had made him “sick.” McGee elaborated, “I do not know what to make of it and particularly when you add to the results of the national election, 33,000 American citizens in Minneapolis voting to turn the city government over to Socialists. That is the last straw.” Soon, as a member of the powerful Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, McGee would become a bitter enemy of Minneapolis’s Socialist mayor.

But in November 1916, international events had not yet cast a shadow over local politics in Minneapolis. Woodrow Wilson had just been reelected president on the slogan “He kept us out of war.” As a committed Socialist, Van Lear, like many left-leaning activists of his day, viewed American militarism in economic terms—as an effort by corporate interests to tighten their hold on the U.S. economy.

On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany. Within a week, the Socialist Party of America had met in emergency session in St. Louis. In what came to be known as the St. Louis Platform, the party adopted an incendiary resolution branding the war “a crime against the people of the United States.” The resolution called for “vigorous resistance” to the draft and to any efforts aimed at limiting labor-union organizing.

Recognizing political realities, Van Lear would demonstrate his pragmatism by supporting the war effort while continuing to condemn those who sought to profit from it. But the newly elected mayor refused to disavow the St. Louis Platform, a stance his opponents would exploit in 1918.

At his inauguration on January 2, 1917, however, Van Lear did not have to deal with the war or the St. Louis Platform. His moderate address avoided the fiery rhetoric that had characterized his campaign speeches. The mayor paid proper deference to the Minneapolis City Council, pledging to cooperate with its 26 members—eight of whom, by this time, were fellow Socialists. He continued his address by taking a stand in favor of law and order, declaring that the city’s homes and its people “must and shall be protected from lawlessness and indecency.”

Then, in a thoughtful statement that reflected his progressive leanings, Van Lear went on to comment about a local issue usually associated with indecency—prostitution. Framing the problem in economic terms, he described prostitutes as victims of a harsh economic system. “In most
instances, it is not passion or corrupt inclinations that impel young women along the road to ruin, but the force of actual physical want,” he observed. “The recruiting grounds for this evil are the stores and factories where young girls work long hours for low wages.”

The newly installed mayor devoted the major section of his inaugural remarks to his signature issue, a pending agreement between the City of Minneapolis and Twin City Rapid Transit Company, the private firm that operated the streetcar system in Minneapolis and St. Paul under franchises granted by both cities. The company and its franchise had emerged as a major issue in Van Lear’s 1916 mayoral campaign. That year, Minneapolis officials were preparing to renegotiate the city’s agreement, which was scheduled to expire in 1923. Under the terms of a recently passed state law, the city and the company were able to negotiate a new agreement prior to 1923 if both parties chose to do so.

The election-year controversy revolved around the value of Twin City Rapid Transit’s assets, which determined the rate of return it was entitled to receive under any new franchise agreement. That prescribed profit, in turn, helped determine the fare that city residents would pay each day when they rode the streetcars and to and from work. During the campaign, Van Lear maintained that the company had artificially inflated the value of its property by more than $20 million in order to maximize its profits.

In his inaugural address, Van Lear restated this charge but did so with less vivid language than he had used during the campaign. He maintained that the valuation issue had to be resolved before the city would move ahead on a new franchise agreement.

Van Lear may have wanted to focus on city targets once he took office, but he found that home-front preparedness was becoming a preoccupation in Minnesota after war was declared. Local officials, including his recent opponent Sheriff Langum, were gearing up to deal with the military draft registration scheduled for June 5. Fearing disruptions and demonstrations by draft opponents on registration day, Langum announced that he had assembled a large crew of special deputies to maintain order.

The mayor’s role in establishing local draft boards caught the attention of John McGee, who once again complained about Van Lear to Sen. Nelson. By now, McGee was the driving force on the seven-member Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, established by the state legislature in April 1917 to clamp down on any actions or statements that the commission believed were impeding
the war effort. In a late-May letter to Nelson, McGee claimed that the mayor was packing neighborhood draft-registration boards with Socialists and men who were pro-German. “Every one of them is opposed to registration and conscription,” McGee declared, without providing any evidence to back up his charges.14

Conscription was a complicated political issue for Van Lear. As mayor, he urged compliance with the registration laws even while his political party had called on its followers to resist. Matters got no easier for him when Hennepin County Socialists—or some of them—adopted a “manifesto” opposing the draft. On May 26 the Minneapolis Journal revealed that the group planned to circulate this statement urging noncompliance just before registration day. This and ensuing reports raised a media furor, according to New Times, Minneapolis’s Socialist weekly.15

In response, Van Lear’s stenographer, Anna A. Maley, became embroiled in an internal Socialist Party dispute, denying that the manifesto was an official position of either the Hennepin County Central Committee or the general membership. Other party leaders disagreed and attempted to censure her for what they considered her pro-war stance. (As a delegate to the St. Louis convention, she had voted for the minority report rather than the incendiary St. Louis Platform.) Van Lear himself seems to have stayed out of this controversy, apparently leaving it to Maley, who was more than just another member of his City Hall clerical staff. A Minnesota native, she was a nationally known Socialist who had written for prominent party newspapers, traveled the country lecturing and organizing, and run for governor of Washington on the Socialist ticket. She returned to Minneapolis in 1915. A member of the national party’s five-person executive committee, Maley was considered one of the Socialists’ intellectual leaders. She functioned as Van Lear’s political confidant and second-in-command. In a later time, she would have had the title of deputy mayor.16

Apparently, these developments did not cause the mayor to share the sheriff’s concerns about possible registration-day disturbances. In early June, Van Lear told local reporters that he did not anticipate any problems when the city’s young men turned out to sign up for the draft. By June 5, Sheriff Langum seemed to agree, although he held his force of 500 deputies at the ready. The next day’s Minneapolis Tribune reported a high turnout and no violence, adding, without further comment, “Registration in Socialist strongholds ran just as heavy as anywhere else.”17

For Van Lear, the draft was more than a contentious political issue; it was also a family matter. His son, Ralph, who shared his father’s political views, was draft age. The younger Van Lear had applied to his local draft board for an exemption, citing his membership in the Socialist Party and his antiwar political beliefs, but his exemption was denied. He was later drafted and served as a private with the U.S. Army’s 337th Field Artillery unit. In November 1917 the Tribune reported that Ralph had recently been released from the guardhouse at Camp Dodge in Iowa after being imprisoned for “sanitary violations.” The paper did not provide details about the nature of these transgressions, but Ralph probably did not have an easy time in the army, given widespread knowledge of his father’s actions as mayor and his own efforts to seek a deferment.18

John McGee, commissioner of public safety and staunch critic of Van Lear, 1918

Anna A. Maley, when she was Socialist candidate for governor of Washington, Commonwealth (Everett, Washington’s Socialist weekly), July 12, 1912, page 1

McGee Would Become a Bitter Enemy of Minneapolis’s Socialist Mayor.
Even as he tended to the day-to-day business of the city, Van Lear continued to give speeches around the state espousing his firmly held Socialist views. In August 1917 attorney George F. Gage from Olivia attended Van Lear’s talk in nearby Glencoe and claimed that the mayor had announced: “The war was not a struggle for democracy but inspired by Wall Street and the munitions makers, and that boys who fell in the conflict would be sacrificed, not for democracy but for commercialism.” Gage reported these details at a meeting of the Minnesota State Bar Association, prompting some angry Minneapolis lawyers to draft a resolution calling on the public safety commission to remove Van Lear from office. The resolution was withdrawn that same day after the majority noted that no stenographic transcription of the speech was available and, therefore, there was no tangible evidence to show the commission.19

About a week later, the Minneapolis Tribune gave prominent coverage to an anti-Van Lear demonstration held in front of the mayor’s Blaisdell Avenue home while he was speaking downtown to an insurance group. The paper noted that the demonstration had occurred following “a red hot loyalty meeting” a few blocks away on the grounds of an elementary school. The Tribune reported that the mayor was “denounced by a half dozen speakers and hissed by 5,000 angry citizens.”20

The next month, on September 29, Van Lear gave a widely reported speech to the Producers’ and Consumers’ Convention in St Paul. There, the mayor told his sympathetic audience, “We have always found in the great shops, mills, factories, and railroads of this country that whenever the employer had the autocratic right to decree as he saw fit and all others must obey, that just at that moment we lost our industrial liberty. At that moment we became industrial slaves.”21

On its opinion page, the Minneapolis Tribune soon made clear its disdain for a mayor it believed was promoting dissent and even disloyalty while the country was at war. In an October 1917 editorial entitled “Our ‘War’ Mayor,” the paper declared: “We have, to be sure, a ‘war mayor.’ But the word ‘war’ in this connection does not signify the same thing as it does when it is used with the word ‘governor’ or ‘president.’ In the one case [Van Lear] it is war against overwhelming public sentiment, against a frank avowal of loyalty to the city, the State and the Nation.”22
In December Van Lear received more negative press when he vetoed an ordinance that would make city residents guilty of vagrancy if they uttered public statements considered seditious or urged noncooperation with U.S. government efforts to prosecute the war. In his veto message, Van Lear maintained that the ordinance could be used to suppress legitimate free speech and that the city already had sufficient laws on the books to deal with vagrancy. The City Council voted to override the mayor's veto, but no evidence has been found that the ordinance was ever enforced.

While he continued to speak about the war and its negative effects on American life, Van Lear was careful to voice his support for the war effort itself. In a speech to a neighborhood-improvement group earlier in the year, reported in the Minneapolis Tribune, Van Lear had noted, “War has been declared and all of us must do our duty . . . but our duty lies in obeying the War Department orders, not those of the New York Chamber of Commerce, the Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association or the newspapers. Do not let yourselves be stampeded, wait until the government tells you what it wants you to do and then do it. In that way, you will be good citizens.”

When he officially launched his reelection campaign in May 1918, Van Lear addressed the issue of loyalty head on in a speech to 1,800 supporters at the Minneapolis Auditorium. He told the cheering crowd, “They [his opponents] had to have some excuse to defeat the working class candidate so they say this fellow Van Lear is not quite loyal. Every one of the candidates who have filed have inferred that [Van Lear] is not quite loyal by saying that he, himself, is super loyal.
and that the people need him above all else.”

Van Lear went on to condemn the city’s aldermen who, he said, voted special favors for the Minneapolis Gas Light Company. “They would like to be elected again, not as friends of the Gas company, but as patriots,” the mayor declared. “Don’t you see the trick? They could not be elected as friends of the Gas company or the Street Railway company, but they hope to be elected as patriots, and they hope to condemn some other men for lack of patriotism.”

Despite his efforts to deflect the loyalty issue, Van Lear found himself on the defensive as the mayoral campaign heated up in 1918. At a pre-primary candidate’s forum at the end of May, the mayor was backed into a corner when the issue of the Socialist Party’s St. Louis Platform was raised. One of his opponents, W. F. Kunze, asked Van Lear if he supported the platform that called the U.S. war declaration “a crime,” and the mayor replied that it was not a city matter. But Kunze continued to press the issue. “Are the voters entitled to know where you stand on the St. Louis platform?” he asked. “To this question, Mr. Van Lear replied ‘Yes,’” the Minneapolis Tribune reported. “‘Well, where do you stand?’ was the direct query. ‘That isn’t a local matter,’ was the reply of Minneapolis’s Socialist mayor.” The Tribune’s page-one account of the forum clearly wounded Van Lear politically. The headline read, “Mayor Van Lear Refuses to Repudiate Socialist Party’s Anti-War Views.”

Sensing he was in trouble politically, Van Lear was able to draw on support from the Nonpartisan League, a recently formed regional group that shared his progressive views but not his Socialist label. In the June primary election, the League, which worked through established political parties, was supporting the campaign bid of former Congress- man Charles A. Lindbergh, who was trying to unseat Minnesota’s incumbent Republican governor, J. A. A. Burnquist.

Surviving the June primary, Van Lear found himself facing J. E. Meyers, the Republican-backed local businessman whom the Tribune persistently called “the loyalist candidate.” As the campaign moved into its final days, Meyers blasted away at Van Lear’s Socialist ties. “I know the moral fiber of the citizenship of Minneapolis. I know that never has it failed to respond to the call of

Minneapolis meeting, June 1918, sponsored by the Nonpartisan League
patriotism and I know that the only real issue to be decided by the mayoral election is the issue of Minneapolis and Americanism vs. Socialism,” Meyers declared. “Men of Minneapolis,” he continued, “this is not a campaign between candidates. The issue has nothing to do with personalities. It is bigger than individuals are. Next Tuesday, you will vote for or against Socialism, the political Socialism that laughs at our Constitution as an anachronism, that seeks to destroy the ideals of modern civilization as represented by home, church, and state, and to substitute for them—no one knows what. You will vote for or against Socialism that proposes to replace democracy with class autocracy—the Bolshevikism of Russia.”

The election was too close to call, but two days later the Tribune announced that Meyers had narrowly defeated Van Lear—by about 1,200 votes—collecting slightly more than 51 percent of the total cast. Clearly, the mayor had been hurt by the St. Louis Platform, but he may have lost some support, as well, from hard-core Socialists who believed that he had not adhered strictly enough to the party’s doctrines.

Van Lear attributed his defeat, at least in part, to the fact that so many of the city’s young men were away from home in the service and unable to vote. He pledged to “continue to fight alongside the common people and against special privilege. We are not discouraged. If we are beat at this election, we will come back when the boys come back.” A week later, on November 11, the boys learned that they would, in fact, be coming back.

An armistice had taken effect. A year and half after the U.S. entered the Great War, it was finally over.

In 1919 the former mayor made a career shift, becoming vice president of Northwest Publishing, a company formed to establish the Minnesota Daily Star as a voice for the state’s emerging liberal-labor movement. Defeat had convinced him that labor would not succeed in politics without more newspapers of its own. Van Lear continued to take an active role in managing the Star until 1924 when it went into receivership and was sold. He made one effort at a political comeback, running in 1921 and narrowly losing the mayor’s post to a war hero, George Leach.

Van Lear died in 1931 at the age of 62 from complications following an operation for an inflamed appen-
dix. His death occurred just weeks after his political soul mate, Floyd B. Olson, took office as Minnesota’s first Farmer-Labor governor. In its front-page retrospective following Van Lear’s death, the *Minneapolis Tribune* observed, “The story of his life is the story of a working man trained as a machinist but gifted with ability to speak persuasively in public, who rose from the shops to the office of mayor of Minneapolis.”

The *Minneapolis Labor Review*’s long-time editor and fervent Van Lear booster, Robley Cramer, eulogized the former mayor. “In the heyday of his political activity, Van Lear commanded the loyalty and enthusiastic support of the workers such as no man before or since has ever achieved in this city.”

City Hall’s working-class champion may have served only briefly in public office, but his impressive political career during the early decades of the last century helped lay the groundwork for the emergence of a progressive movement that would continue to shape civic life in Minneapolis well into the modern era.

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**Notes**


10. Here and below, Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, vol. 43, Jan. 2, 1917, 10–13 (quotes, 10, 11), MNHS.


12. City Council, *Proceedings*, vol. 43, 11–12. In a report to stockholders, TCRT president Horace Lowry asserted that Minneapolis was “moving slowly with franchise negotiations”; Twin City Rapid Transit Company, *Annual Report*, 1917, n.p., MNHS. Lowry’s statement probably reflected Van Lear’s reluctance to condone what he saw as a giveaway. After Van Lear left office, city officials did sign off on a new franchise agreement, but it was rejected by the voters in a referendum on December 9, 1919. By the early 1920s, regulatory authority over TCRT had been transferred to a state agency, the Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission.


14. John F. McGee to Knute Nelson, May 31, 1917, Nelson papers. A year later, Van Lear’s City Council allies proposed a resolution calling on Gov. J. A. Burnquist to remove McGee from the Public Safety Commission because of inflammatory remarks McGee had made at a U.S. Senate hearing. That resolution was tabled, but the council did adopt a substitute calling for a delegation of council members to meet with the governor to “protest” McGee’s statements. Minneapolis City Council, *Proceedings*, vol. 44, Apr. 26, 1918, 209.


17. Minneapolis Tribune, June 4, 5, and 6, 1917—all 1.


19. Minneapolis Tribune, Aug. 10, 1917, 1. That same month, the Public Safety Commission did remove two New Ulm officials from their posts: MayorLouis Fritsche and City Attorney Albert Pfaender. The two had spoken at a rally urging support for a bill in Congress that would have enabled draftees of German ancestry to avoid combat duty on the Western Front. McGee and other fervent loyalists viewed New Ulm, with its large German American community, as potential fifth column, waiting to sabotage the war effort. Chrislock, *Watchdog*, 133–40.


25. Here and below, Labor Review, May 24, 1918, 2.


28. For “loyalist,” see *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 3 and 6, 1918, 1. Under Minneapolis’s officially nonpartisan municipal election system, the top two vote-getters in the June primary moved on to the general election in November.


33. Minneapolis Tribune, Mar. 5, 1931, 1. Following his defeat in 1918, Van Lear aligned himself with the Nonpartisan League and its political successor, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party.

34. Labor Review, Mar. 31, 1931, 8.

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