



A Republican Estimate of Party Problems in 1892

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Article Summary: A confidential letter from the chairman of the Republican State Central Committee to a Chicago editor analyses the prospects of Nebraska Republicans at a time when Populists were attempting to form a coalition with Democrats.

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A REPUBLICAN ESTIMATE OF PARTY PROBLEMS IN 1892

EDITED BY JOHN HIGHAM

IN 1892 the Nebraska Republicans regained much of the ground they had lost to their angry agrarian foes two years earlier. It was the only victory in a general election that the traditionally dominant party in the state secured during the whole stormy decade of the nineties, and it was far from an assured one. For fifteen years a mounting demand for railroad control had racked the state. In 1890, this together with an unmanageable burden of mortgages and an unprecedented drouth delivered Nebraska into the hands of the Democrats and the new Independent Party sired by the Farmers' Alliance. By early 1892 the Alliance forces were creating the Populist Party on a national scale while locally they were reaching out for some kind of coalition with the Democrats.¹ Although weather conditions had

¹ John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis, 1931), *passim*; John D. Barnhart, "Rainfall and the Populist Party in Nebraska," *American Political Science Review*, XIX (August, 1925), 527-540; Frank Haigh Dixon, "Railroad Control in Nebraska," *Political Science Quarterly*, XIII (December, 1898), 617-647.

improved greatly in the previous year, the political sky was still overcast when the chairman of the Republican State Central Committee sat down in March, 1892, to write a confidential estimate of his party's prospects to a sympathetic Chicago editor.

Samuel D. Mercer, a leading Omaha surgeon and businessman, was one of the principal participants in the Republican victory in the fall election. His distinguished medical career, begun in the Union Army, included the establishment of Omaha's first hospital, the position of chief surgeon of the Union Pacific Railroad, and finally in 1886, the vice-presidency of the American Medical Association. Thereafter he left medicine for business enterprises such as real estate promotion and the consolidation of Omaha's streetcar system. In 1891, following an unsuccessful bid for the Republican gubernatorial nomination, Mercer became chairman of the Republican State Central Committee.² His fear that the Populists would reach a firm alliance with the Democrats proved to be mistaken, and in the end the division between them was an essential factor in the Republicans' success.³ Nevertheless, Mercer's appraisal of the situation seven months before the election casts a revealing light on political and economic conditions and on the mind of an astute business politician as well.⁴

² Arthur C. Wakely, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County: A Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement* (2 vols., Chicago, 1917), II, 879-881; J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (3 vols., Lincoln, 1905-13), III, 242.

³ *Appletons' Annual Cyclopaedia*, 1892, pp. 485-486.

⁴ This letter is contained in the files of the National Civic Federation in the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library. Easley left the newspaper business in 1893 to organize the Civic Federation of Chicago, which he later enlarged into the National Civic Federation. This letter is published with the kind permission of Mrs. Gertrude Easley.

Nebraska Republican State Central Committee
Omaha, Nebraska
Mch. 28th, 1892

R. M. Easley, Esq.,
Editor Politico-Economic Department,
Inter-Ocean,
Dear Sir:

Answering yours of March 26th, I have to say that after hastily scanning your article, "Farmers' Movements," I commend it as a worthy political document, if facts stated are incontrovertible.⁵

Nebraska is certainly in danger of defeat by the Alliance people. They are organizing very systematically, with leaders at the head who are popular, and powerful in political conflicts, and in addition to this, the Democratic party, in all probability, will make some kind of an alliance with them, so far as local tickets are concerned, and in my opinion, they will only vote for one set of electors. This may however, annoy some of the "old line" Republicans, who have joined the Alliance, and thus cause a break in their ranks.

Another difficulty that we must encounter here, is the known fact that the Republican party is divided into three sections; one known as "railroad Republicans," another as "anti-railroad Republicans," and the third as "Republicans." If it be possible for the Republicans proper to establish a condition of precedence that will cause both of the other wings to come into line, and work solidly, shoulder to shoulder for victory this fall, then we may be successful even against the anticipated alliance between the farmers and the Democrats.

The rural districts of our state were never more prosperous, nor the people better contented, than ours are now, on account of good crops last year and abundance of well-

⁵ The Chicago *Inter Ocean* was an uncompromisingly conservative, Republican newspaper. Through Easley, it was engaged in exposing alleged scandals in the Alliance movement and in combatting the emerging third party.

filled granaries, holding over against possible contingencies in the future.

Our farmers are also liquidating their mortgages very rapidly, and as a consequence, country merchants are thrifty, banks and loaning institutions have plenty of money and interest rates are low, but with not much demand for money.

Of course this state of things produces more or less stagnation in the active enterprises, because the money is not changing hands rapidly, owing to the fact that money received in payments of notes does not find ready investment, because building enterprise and commercial industries generally, seem to be passing through what might be termed a resting period, but the indications are, that this will be followed by an unusual activity in all directions. It is quite evident, however, that this year must pass, and another good crop received before confidence will be fully re-established, and before people will be fully recovered from the calamities of 1890.

Conditions that would be most effective for the Republican party, would be a thorough impression made upon the people of the good results that come from the tariff doctrines to the ordinary consumers, i.e., they should be shown how it affects them favorably, both in the purchasing of their own goods, and sale of their products. The next greatest good that can be done to the Republican party, would be to establish harmony in their own ranks, if possible.

This letter I write you confidentially, for your own information, not to be divulged.

Very respectfully,

/s/ S. D. MERCER

Dict.