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Article Summary: This letter written by Norris to describe his 1924 campaign platform originally appeared in the *New State*, edited by C. A. Sorensen.

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Cataloging Information:

Norris Program Topics (inserted in the letter by C. A. Sorensen): Ballinger removal, kind of public official needed, against party machines, temperance and woman suffrage, for direct primary, against extremely high tariffs, reduced taxation, increase of inheritance tax, the discouragement of defeat, legislation for farmer, amendment to constitution, will spend no money, partisanship great evil, cheap water power, office has no allurements

THE NORRIS PROGRAM IN 1924

EDITED BY JAMES A. STONE

THE letter below, from George W. Norris to C. A. Sorensen, was "discovered" in the Sorensen collection in the course of research on the politics of the farm problem in Nebraska during the decade of the Twenties. C. A. Sorensen was deeply involved in both Senator Norris' bid for reelection and Senator La Follette's presidential campaign in Nebraska in 1924. The letter was requested by Sorensen who asked Norris for a campaign platform. It was subsequently printed in the *New State*, a progressive oriented newspaper edited by Sorensen. The letter is a remarkably lucid statement of Norris' political convictions and provides an insight into the political philosophy of Norris. In it are references to such reforms as the 20th Amendment and the Non-partisan Unicameral Legislature which he later sponsored. While it was used during the campaign of 1924 it received little notice, and it seemed to warrant republication.

James A. Stone is assistant professor of history at Kearney State Teachers College. He found the letter reprinted here, and suggested its publication, while he was working on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Nebraska, under the supervision of Professor James C. Olson.

The 1924 campaign was a bitter one in Nebraska. Norris' opponent was former Democratic Senator Gilbert M. Hitchcock, owner of the *Omaha World-Herald*. Norris was subjected to a vicious whispering campaign sponsored by regular members of his own party. It was charged that he was no Republican and had accomplished little for Nebraska because he had no influence with the Republican administration in Washington.¹ In addition, the progressive forces in Nebraska were badly split between the Omaha faction and the Sorensen group—a factional dispute that had arisen during the 1922 campaign of the Progressive party in Nebraska. The Progressives were also influenced by the fact that Charles W. Bryan was running on the Democratic vice-presidential ticket and La Follette was running on a separate La Follette Progressive ticket. Despite these handicaps, Norris handily won his bid for reelection to the Senate.

Washington, D. C.
February 17, 1924

Hon. C. A. Sorensen,
316 Funke Building,
Lincoln, Nebraska.

Dear Mr. Sorensen :

I am in receipt of your letter of February eleventh.² It would be quite difficult for me to give what might be determined "My Platform". My views are so well known, and I think so well understood, especially by the people in Nebraska, that I would hardly know where to begin nor where to end.

Another thing that I have observed from my experience of a good many years, is that while platforms are important, nobody pays very much attention to them because it is realized that they are made for the purpose of getting in, and then are immediately forgotten. Another thing is

¹ Letter, C. A. Sorensen to G. W. Norris, April 7, 1924. Sorensen collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

² As this letter appeared in the March 1924 issue of the *New State*, the salutation and the introductory sentence were omitted.

that it is found very often (in fact, I think it is so more often than otherwise), that new things arise after a man has been elected to office that are not thought of either by himself or his constituents, during his campaign for election, and he must take sides on questions as they arise that are entirely new.

For instance, in the last campaign, nobody knew that the Teapot Dome episode was going to assume such wonderful probabilities, and yet ever since I can remember, the question of the conservation of the public resources of the United States has been a very important issue. The people very often forgot it in the campaign. Nothing was said about it in most of the campaigns, but many of us knew that the question always existed and we realized its importance a great deal more than the same was realized by people generally.

BALLINGER REMOVAL³

Recent developments might well remind us of the Ballinger-Pinchot proposition, and yet most people have forgotten that I was the fellow who made that a real investigation. It was not in my platform when I was elected. Nobody knew it was coming up, and people now have forgotten it, but when it came up and the investigation was started by the friends of Ballinger himself, the brushes and the whitewash were all ready for application and it was only necessary to select a committee to make the actual application of the whitewash. It was then that they run against a snag. You will remember that when this question arose, while Mr. Taft was President and Mr. Ballinger was Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Pinchot and Mr. Glavis had both been arbitrarily removed because they were trying to prevent the carrying out of the policy of Mr. Ballinger in giving away the coal lands belonging to all the people of the United States. The newspapers said so much about it that the Administration determined upon an investigation. It was an open secret that this investigation was going to whitewash Ballinger. Sherman was Vice President of the United States and Presiding Officer of the Senate. Cannon was Speaker of the House. The resolution providing for

³ This and the subsequent headings were inserted in the Norris letter when it was published by the *New State*. They are retained here for their value as a guide to the topics discussed.

the Ballinger investigation also provided for the appointment of the Committee, one-half by the President of the Senate (Sherman), and one-half by the Speaker of the House (Cannon). I will never forget the announcement that was made in the public press the morning when this fight began in the House. It had gone through the Senate, and the well-oiled machine carried out the program without a block. The morning papers announced that Mr. Dalzell, representing the Committee on Rules, would bring in a special bill that day and that the House would pass the resolution, and then it gave the names of the Members of the House that Mr. Cannon would appoint. The machine was in such fine running order that they announced the whole program through the public press. Nobody doubted but that it would be carried out just as it was outlined, and according to announcement, at the very hour, Mr. Dalzell brought in the report of the Committee on Rules. The Democrats were anxious to debate it and to expose the conditions as much as they could in debate, but they knew they would have nothing to say about the Committee, that the resolution would pass at the end of the debate, and that the machine's orders would be carried out. When the resolution came up it was agreed that the resolution itself should be subject to a certain amount of debate, divided equally between the Democrats and the Republicans. By unanimous consent it was agreed that any person securing the floor should have the right to offer an amendment, and that at the end of the debate, those amendments should all be voted on. It will be seen therefore, that no one had even a right to offer an amendment unless he secured the floor. Champ Clark was in control on the Democratic side. The control on the Republican side was in the hands of Mr. Dalzell of Pennsylvania. Nobody anticipated that an amendment would be offered which could be debated over the objection of the Republican machine. It was the time however, when the insurgents of the House were really organized, and when they voted together and the Democrats stood hitched, they were able to control the House. As soon as this agreement about amendments was offered, I knew, or at least I thought I knew, that we would be able to throw a monkey wrench into their machine. I waited until Mr. Dalzell went to lunch. He left the matter in charge of Mr. Smith, of Iowa, afterwards Judge. Mr. Smith and I were very close friends, and I went to Mr. Smith and told him I would like to have a little time and that I would like to have him yield it to me right away. I think he gave me two minutes. I have forgotten exactly, but I think that is

the time. There was a Democrat then talking who had five minutes. At the conclusion of his remarks and before Mr. Dalzell came back from lunch, Smith granted me two minutes, and that was all the time I needed. During these two minutes I simply called attention to the fact that the machine was well oiled and the whitewash brush was all ready, that the names of those who would apply it were already known and that they were to be appointed by the Speaker. I said that any committee appointed by the Speaker would not have the confidence of the country, and therefore I moved to amend it as follows: "Strike out 'appointed by the Speaker' and insert in lieu thereof 'elected by the House'. That was the end of my speech. This amendment brought consternation at once. It was seen immediately that if this Committee were elected, that a combination of insurgents and Democrats could control the House end of it absolutely. It seemed very simple. Everybody understood it at once. But I doubt very much whether the Republican machine would have gotten into this predicament had Mr. Dalzell not gone to lunch, but Smith had no knowledge of the kind of an amendment I was going to offer. In fact, he did not know that I intended to offer an amendment, but under the unanimous consent agreement they were compelled to vote on this amendment. The insurgents and the Democrats combined and we carried the amendment, and that is what revolutionized the Ballinger-Pinchot investigation. The insurgents had combined with the Democrats and they notified the machine Republicans that the persons whom the newspapers announced were to be appointed by the Speaker, could not be members of this Committee. We insisted that the insurgents should absolutely name one member of the Committee. The Democrats agreed with us, and agreed with us also upon black-listing quite a number of machine Republicans. We also agreed upon who the Democratic members should be, and after several days of jangling back and forth, this agreement was put into effect. The insurgents unanimously agreed that I should be the representative of the insurgents. I declined this because I did not want to seem to get any personal honor out of the fight that I had instigated, but I selected the insurgent myself who should represent us. It was Madison, of Kansas, one of the best men in our crowd. He was on the committee. The very fact that we had control of the House end of the Committee had an effect upon the Senate end of the Committee. They were compelled from the very force of circumstances to make it a real investigation instead of a white-washing party.

That is how the facts in the Ballinger-Pinchot investigation came to light. At the time it was all understood by the people of the country. They speak now of the developments in the Ballinger-Pinchot investigation, but have forgotten that as a matter of fact, there would have been no real investigation had it not been for me. And yet, in my platform there was nothing said about anything of that kind. It was something that arose after I was elected and was given no consideration by anyone who voted for or against me.

KIND OF PUBLIC OFFICIAL NEEDED

What we want in a public official is one who will be right when questions of this kind arise. I could have let this slide. I could have voted the other way without violating any pledge that I ever made in a campaign, and yet it seems to me that even though I kept every specific pledge and violated my duty in a case of this kind, I would have been derelict and not entitled to the seat that the people had given me. I call your attention to these facts because I think they are almost as interesting as a novel and likewise to the fact that I gained a good many thanks from progressive people over the United States. Many of them are still my friends and believe in me, although they have forgotten the reason why they have been drawn toward men like myself.

AGAINST PARTY MACHINES

I think you could write my platform as well as I could. I have always stood against political machines and the domination of parties by caucuses. I think I had more to do than any other one man in abolishing to a great extent, the caucus in the House of Representatives. When I first came here the caucus was almost a weekly occurrence. Whenever the party had any particular thing they wanted to put over, they called a caucus, and by thousands of the various ways that men are controlled in secret, they were taken into the caucus, tied and bound. No matter how they felt personally, they went out and voted at the command of the caucus rather than follow the dictates of their conscience. In addition to fighting the rules of the House, I fought this caucus proposition with the result that it was

finally abolished, and while the machine is still all-powerful, they were compelled to give up the instrumentality of the caucus. The secret caucus was the most effective way years ago by which men were compelled to do the bidding of the machine. They cannot do it through this means at the present time, and are thus handicapped to quite an extent in controlling Members of Congress. And yet I did not make this fight on the caucus because I was bound to any platform pledge. It all means that a man who is right on fundamental principles will be right on concrete propositions; and that a man who is wrong on these fundamental principles, although he may pledge himself and even carry out his pledges, is still a bad legislator and will go wrong when these concrete things come up.

TEMPERANCE AND WOMAN SUFFRAGE

I have always voted for temperance and prohibition measures. I stood for woman suffrage when the man who is now running against me was against it, although he afterwards came over. In other words, I was a pioneer. He, like many others, came over when the move became popular.

FOR DIRECT PRIMARY

I stood for the primary when it needed friends. I stood for railroad rate regulation, and now stand for the control of freight rates through the instrumentality of a governmental corporation that shall have power to build, buy and operate railroads.

AGAINST EXTREMELY HIGH TARIFFS

I opposed my party in the iniquitous levying of tariffs, and while I always have believed, and still believe, in the theory of protection, I have always realized that when it is carried to the extreme it becomes a danger and an injury rather than a benefit.

REDUCED TAXATION

I do not believe the people of Nebraska have any doubt as to where I stand on the question of taxation. It may be

that they have forgotten, but it has only been a few years ago since under the Wilson administration we passed the first War Revenue Act. We had a fight in the Senate lasting many days, and the contest was between a small number of progressive men about half Republicans and half Democrats, who were determined to increase the taxes on war profits and big incomes, and those who did not want such legislation. That was while the war was on. Everybody knew that immense profiteering was taking place, and that unless we taxed these profiteers on what they made, and taxed them at once, the opportunity to tax them at all on their awful profits would be gone forever. We undertook to tax war profits as high as eighty per cent. We offered all kinds of amendments running from that, down. We were always defeated, but everytime we had a roll call I do not believe the people have any doubt as to where I stood on all these propositions, even though they may have entirely forgotten concrete instances. I did everything I could to levy a heavy tax on these unholy profiteers. It was under a Democratic Administration. The Administration was bitterly opposed to it, as was likewise the stand-pat brigade on the Republican side.

INCREASE OF INHERITANCE TAX

I stood also for an increase of the inheritance or estate tax. I still believe that one of the fairest taxes in the world is a tax on inheritances, and while I have no prejudice against the rich man, and would not do him an injury if I could, I think that when a man dies, leaving an estate of two or three hundred million dollars, the Government ought to take a large portion of it in the way of an estate tax. I would be liberal with the exemption. Let him give untaxed to his children and to his wife, enough money to keep them in luxury without any work during their entire lives. Tax the small estates very lightly. I would not care if they exempted entirely, an estate of five hundred thousand, but I would carry the tax up to as high as seventy-five or eighty percent when it reached estates running into the tens and hundreds of millions. And I do not admit that I am illogical when I stand for such a proposition. I claim that a Government that protects any man who makes—let us say one hundred million dollars—and protects him while he is accumulating it, has a right to take at least half of it when he is through with it and cannot use it any longer.

The balance might go anywhere he wanted to put it. It would still leave his family in luxury way beyond what they have any legal right to claim. Such a tax would be easy and inexpensive to collect, and would relieve the burdens of every man and woman who toils. We knew when we went into this fight that we were going to fail. We knew that the combination of Democrats and Republicans was going to overwhelm us at every step and the fight was made, not for us but for the great common people of the country. We repeated the same thing when the next Democratic Revenue Bill came in. They had themselves reached the conclusion then that they must increase taxes, but still they did not increase where we wanted to go. Again we were defeated all along the line, and the result was that hundreds of millions of war profits escaped without being much more than touched. If we had succeeded we would have saved the issuing in my opinion, of at least ten billions of Government bonds that we have otherwise saddled upon posterity, and we would have done this without bringing hardship to anybody. When the Republicans came into power and another Revenue Bill was up, we made the same fight again although the reason for levying extremely high taxes on incomes had to a great extent passed away. The profiteers had escaped with their ill-gotten gains. In the Revenue Bill that will come up in this Congress, I will again try to get a larger tax on inheritances. I am going to do the best I can to tax the incomes of corporations. Under the present law the men with big incomes incorporate and escape the high surtaxes. I do not believe Mr. Mellon is right in his remedy. He does not even propose to shut up the great loophole by which many hundreds of millions of dollars got away through the simple act of incorporating and thus paying a flat rate of twelve percent. Taxation is of course, always burdensome. I wish I could relieve it entirely from the shoulders of everybody, but we have fought the war, we have incurred the debt, and we must pay every dollar of it some time.

THE DISCOURAGEMENT OF DEFEAT

It is a discouraging thing to continue to fight losing fights. Say what you will, a man is so constituted that once in a while at least, he wants to win, and when a small body of us fight over and over and over again the same old battle with the same result, working as we believe for

the benefit of all the people, and always meeting with defeat, there comes a time when the spirit as well as the flesh weakens. I do not believe the people really appreciate sometimes, how heart-breaking it is to keep on with this kind of a contest, between those who want to relieve the people from their burdens and those who want to escape dividing up their big incomes and their big profits.

LEGISLATION FOR FARMER

From the very beginning I have stood for legislation that would be beneficial to the farmer, and while I have not accomplished what it seems to me I should have accomplished, and while I cannot see even now how I am going to accomplish what ought to be accomplished, I have been doing the best I could although the results have not been what I wanted.

AMENDMENT TO CONSTITUTION⁴

I have believed and still believe and have always voted for a greater democracy, the primary, the referendum, the recall. I wanted to place the Government more directly in the hands of the people who are governed. I introduced in the last Congress and secured the passage through the Senate, of an amendment to the Constitution which provided that Congress should convene in January following the election in November, instead of waiting thirteen months. The effect would have been to abolish the short session of Congress—one of the most objectionable features of our Government. It is in a short session of Congress that jokers of all kinds get into legislation. When everybody knows that Congress must adjourn on the fourth of March and the calendars are crowded, and everybody understands that not one-half of the bills on the calendars can even be considered, there is always a rush and always opportunities for securing bad legislation for the very want of consideration—opportunities to get jokers into legislation—opportunities to defeat legislation that the people want. In every way it is an unscientific and objectionable

⁴ In this section Norris forecasts his success in gaining passage of the Twentieth or "Lame-Duck" Amendment which was accomplished in 1933.

feature of our Government. This amendment passed the Senate, went to the House, received a favorable report from the Committee, and was on the calendar when the Congress died. Mr. Campbell of Kansas, a lame duck, was temporarily occupying the Speaker's chair during his sickness, and he arbitrarily refused recognition and prevented the House from voting upon this proposed amendment. It was admitted that it would have passed the House almost unanimously.

Nothing of this kind was ever on the platform on which I ran. I never made any pledge to the people on that kind of a proposition, and I could have rested easy in my chair and said nothing about it. I might have technically followed my platform and redeemed my promises, and still been wrong on that particular thing, and if I had been wrong that amendment would never have passed the Senate because it happened that the matter was thrown into my hands. In a joking way a resolution was referred to the Committee on Agriculture. I took that resolution home with me. Nobody ever expected it to be reported out. It was a resolution saying in affect, that it was the opinion of those who passed it (I think it was the Farmers' Union), that men who had been defeated for reelection (Lame Ducks) should not vote on matters then coming up in the Senate during the short session. It seemed to me after I had thought it over, that this resolution laid the foundation upon which we could pass a resolution to amend the Constitution, as I have outlined. I called the Agricultural Committee together and laid my plans before them. They unanimously agreed with me and they authorized me to prepare the right kind of a resolution and report it to the Senate, which I did. And so this joke became something serious. I had a fight in the Senate to even get it up. No such thing as that had ever before in the history of the country, come from the Agricultural Committee. It was something entirely new, but they could not go back on it because the records showed that the Senate itself had referred the original resolution to us. I finally secured a vote, and as I have said, it passed the Senate almost unanimously. That same resolution is now pending again. This time it is before the Judiciary Committee. I have had it up for four weeks in succession and will have it up again tomorrow in that Committee. I expect to get it out before I get through, but I never promised my people in Nebraska, on any platform pledge, that I would do anything of this kind.

I might go on at almost any length if I could remember the various things that have happened during my public career. It is sufficient to say that I have never been moved by a platform. I have done, when an emergency arose, what I believed to be right, and I have received reelection at the hands of the people not because I redeemed platform pledges but because I have not been tied in the fundamental things of Government and have always embraced every opportunity, regardless of platforms and parties, to bring about some reform in Government in the interest of the people themselves. This I shall continue to do as long as I am in public service.

WILL SPEND NO MONEY

I do not intend to take any part in the primary. In fact, I rather feel as though no active part ought to be taken in the campaign, even by my friends. I have been weighed in the balance so often—have been on the firing line for twenty years. If the people do not want the kind of a man I am I want them to get somebody else. I do not want any money spent in my behalf. I would like to have as much publicity as possible, and if the campaign against me needs attention because it is unfair, I would like to see such matters completely met.

PARTISANSHIP GREAT EVIL⁵

I think one of the greatest evils of Government is partisanship. That is the thing I had in mind to try to bring about when I announced that I would not be a candidate for reelection. It ought to be a business institution. No man ought to be put in a clerical position or put out of a clerical position on the grounds of his politics. If he performs his official duty faithfully he ought to be retained. If he is simply a politician he ought to be put out, no matter to what party he belongs. I believe we could abolish more than half of the offices in the State of Nebraska. No man deserves an office simply because he has taken an active

⁵ In this section is foreshadowed the success of a Norris program ten years later. In 1934 Nebraska adopted a constitutional amendment providing for a non-partisan unicameral legislature for the state.

part in somebody's behalf. He ought to be given an office on the strength of his qualifications for the office and for no other reason.

Everybody in the State, I believe, knows where I stand on practically every public question, and I think they know me so well that if some new proposition arose that had never been thought of or discussed in a campaign, most people, if they understood the question itself, would be able to tell where I would stand on it. For instance, I do not believe there is a citizen of Nebraska, regardless of his politics, who had any doubt as to where I would be on the Teapot Dome proposition or as to the prosecution of those who have violated the law or stolen the property of the United States. If they think I am wrong on this, then they ought to put me out. In fact, if the people of Nebraska think I am wrong I do not want to be in any longer. I can only say to the people of Nebraska, that I will do in the future as I have done in the past. I realize that I have often failed,—perhaps more often failed than succeeded, and I want it distinctly understood that I do not claim that I am perfect. I will make mistakes in the future as I have made them in the past. It is sometimes a physical impossibility to go to the bottom and understand clear through the questions that I am called upon to vote on, but with the light I have, I will always vote my convictions.

CHEAP WATER POWER

I do not believe there would be any doubt in the mind of any Nebraskan as to where I would stand on the water power proposition, for instance. I do not remember ever having made a platform pledge on it, but I believe that particular question is going to increase in importance and that eventually it will be one of the great problems for solution. I would like to retain, for the benefit of all the people, the right to use the powers of all streams, without the intervention of any profit-making or profit-taking middlemen. Electricity is to become one of the great factors in human existence, not only in manufacturing industries and in the question of transportation, but in the comforts and smaller things connected with every home in the land. It ought to be given to the people at absolute cost. The streams that are flowing down hill were given us by a Creator. They do not belong to any special interest or to any individual. They belong to the people and ought to be

utilized for the benefit of all of them. The importance of it is not fully realized now by the great mass of our citizens, but the far-seeing and ingenious corporation is even now trying to control the water powers of the country. I have secured the passage through the Senate on at least two different occasions, of the right of the Government to develop a young Niagara on the Potomac River, almost in sight of the Capitol itself. It would seem that in the District of Columbia, no opposition would occur to such a proposition, and yet an unseen power that so often controls legislation has always been too great to secure the enactment of this proposition into law. Members of the Cabinet, both Democrat and Republican, have interfered and brought the influence of Administrations of both parties against this thing. They fear a demonstration at the Capitol City of what can be done by the proper use of water power for the people themselves rather than to turn it over to speculators and profiteers. Everybody knows where I would stand on a proposition of this kind.

OFFICE HAS NO ALLUREMENT

It seems to me it is useless to spend a lot of money trying to tell the people over and over again my position. As I look at it, they know where I stand. If it suits them, they ought to vote for me. If it does not, then they ought to vote against me. I would like them to have the facts and vote intelligently and what the result may be, I will accept. I could not always have made this statement truthfully. There have been times in my life, and I presume it is true with most public men, when ambition, and I think an honorable ambition, caused in my heart great concern about such things. I have however, lost all that. I am not allured by the honor of an office. I have received all the honor that I can ever expect. I would like to repay a grateful people by an unprejudiced and an unbiased service in their behalf. I have no other ambition. I would rather do this as a private citizen than any other way, but it seems the people themselves, or at least a large number of them, have willed it otherwise and have practically forced me into the fight. I have only one pride and that is to do some good for humanity. I am on the down-hill side, sometimes I think, traveling rapidly. The end cannot be very many years in advance. I am not conscious of having a single selfish motive. I think that I have to a great extent, run

my race. If I can do some good while I am traveling over the balance of the road I want to do it, because I realize I am going over it for the last time. Neither money nor office holds any enchanting allurements. In my modest way and without injury if possible, to any human being, I want to do what little good I can for my fellow men.

With kindest regards, I Am

Sincerely,

G. W. Norris