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Article Title: Isolationism versus Internationalism? The Republican Senatorial Primary in Nebraska, 1946

Full Citation: Justus F Paul, "Isolationism versus Internationalism? The Republican Senatorial Primary in Nebraska, 1946," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 145-156.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975Isolation.pdf>

Date: 9/30/2015

Article Summary: The Senatorial Primary in Nebraska, 1946, pitted Hugh A Butler, a pre-war isolationist, against Dwight Griswold, a champion of internationalism. It was widely held that the outcome would reflect whether the traditional isolationism of the Middle West had been affected by the events of World War II and America's participation in the United Nations. The author concludes that Butler's victory was due to other factors rather than his international stance.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Robert Taft, John Bricker, Kenneth Wherry, Henrik Shipstead, Gerald Nye, Richard Ross, Hugh A Butler, Dwight Griswold, Karl Stefan, Harold Stassen, Roscoe Drummond, Harlan Bushfield, Earl Meyer, Mrs Wade Martin, Richard H McCann, Earl Allen

Keywords: Greek Loan Program; Office of Price Administration; Political Action Committee; Allen and Reynolds Advertising Company

Photographs / Images: Senator Hugh Butler and Richard Ross; 1937 photo of Dwight Griswold and friends visiting Interlochen, Switzerland; Group photo of Governor Griswold's party and plane in North Africa

ISOLATIONISM VERSUS INTERNATIONALISM? THE REPUBLICAN SENATORIAL PRIMARY IN NEBRASKA, 1946

By JUSTUS F. PAUL

The debate between the isolationists and the internationalists was geographically broadly based in the mid 1940's as it had been earlier. Yet, the preponderance of isolationist spokesmen in the Middle West seems to have given special emphasis to the issue in that area. Robert Taft, John Bricker, Kenneth Wherry, Henrik Shipstead, Gerald Nye, and Hugh Butler were just a few of the more noteworthy of the isolationist group in the Middle West. Although some pre-World War II isolationists changed their positions during the war, those mentioned above remained unconvinced as the war came to an end.

How well did this group of isolationist spokesmen represent their constituency in the Middle West? One early test of isolationist strength, or at least so claimed several political pundits, came in the Republican senatorial primary in Nebraska in 1946. The incumbent, Hugh A. Butler, was an "unredeemed" pre-war isolationist. The challenger, Governor Dwight Griswold, was an avowed champion of internationalism. *Newsweek* summed up the attitude of much of the news media by suggesting that "the outcome may provide an indication of how far the so-called cornbelt states have drifted back to prewar isolationism."¹ The *New York Times* echoed this sentiment, noting that "the primary decision will indicate whether the traditional isolationism of the Middle West has been affected by the events of World War II and American participation in the United Nations."²

Both contenders reinforced the belief that the issue in 1946 was isolationism versus internationalism. Governor Griswold, thrice elected by Nebraska's voters and later to serve as the chief administrator of the Greek Loan Program, entered the primary campaign early, announcing his candidacy in December of 1945. He did so in spite of efforts to prevent his filing by Butler and his aides. Butler had spent much of his first term building up a constituency and sought to eliminate possible competitors in any way he could. It was reported by Congressman Karl Stefan of Nebraska's third district that Butler had even offered Griswold a federal job in an effort to thwart his candidacy.³ Not all of the maneuvering was by the Butler forces, however, as Griswold's political manager, Ira Beynon, had suggested as early as the summer of 1945 that Butler should seek the governorship in 1946, a suggestion which Butler promptly dismissed.⁴ In spite of Butler's attempts to dissuade him, Griswold entered the senatorial race. A press release announcing his candidacy stressed Griswold's youthfulness, experience, his overwhelming gubernatorial majorities in 1942 and 1944, and suggested that his major campaign theme would be his opposition to the position on foreign affairs taken by some Republican senators prior to Pearl Harbor, a clear reference to Butler's isolationist record during 1941.⁵

Butler, who had prepared carefully for the 1946 election, also filed early. In so doing he had hoped to preclude other candidates and to establish himself with the delegates already elected to the pre-primary convention. A Nebraska law passed in 1943 provided for the election of four hundred delegates to state party conventions to endorse candidates for the various offices. In the primary election in 1944, the delegates to the 1946 pre-primary convention were chosen. Butler sought to insure "a friendly majority in that 400 Club" from the outset. As the incumbent he was in a good position to work toward that end. A three-man task force made a tour of the state between February 18 and March 14, and assessed the probable vote among each county's delegation. Each delegate was analyzed individually and Butler was urged to contact those who were unsure of how they would vote at the pre-primary convention.⁶ On March 19, in Omaha, Butler received the endorsement of the convention which meant that his name

would be designated as the choice of the party on the primary ballot.

The platform adopted at the pre-primary convention was the usual idealistic hodge-podge. It called for a return to constitutional government; support for the United Nations; opposition to foreign loans except on a sound basis and through private channels; support for a strong Army, Navy, and Air Force; reduction of governmental expenses and abolition of war-time controls; along with the usual pleas for freedom and the Constitution.⁷ The *Omaha World-Herald* suggested that since both candidates favored all planks in the platform, the campaign would simply be one between two men wanting the same job.⁸

Griswold disagreed with this contention and promptly announced his intention to carry his campaign to the voters. Charging that Butler had been endorsed by the "courthouse politicians in Omaha," he indicated that his campaign would appeal to those voters who were concerned with "whether [or not] the Republican party of Nebraska plans to return to the conditions of 50 years ago," another reference to the maintenance of pre-war positions by Butler.⁹

Immediate post-convention statements by both candidates stressed the role of their positions on foreign policy. In accepting the endorsement of the convention, Butler noted that

Those of us charged with the responsibility of leadership in these United States are alert to the failure of the administration in all of its phases of government. We, who have been in the Senate these past years, feel that with our experience, gained through the gruelling hours of almost disaster following Pearl Harbor are capable of bringing the administration to a point where it can be handled by those of us who are concerned wholly with the welfare of our own people. We must be a good neighbor to all, but Internationalism as such, must be sidetracked.¹⁰

Griswold responded on March 27 by announcing that he would "to a large extent make internationalism the foundation of my campaign." He noted his disagreement with the platform adopted by the convention by indicating that he was "definitely in favor of loans to Great Britain and other friendly powers." He said that "he did not want to make loans . . . but it was not a case of what one wanted to do but what one had to do." He concluded by charging that leadership of the type offered by Butler would lead to another war.¹¹

Griswold repeated his attack on Butler's isolationist leaning in a radio message broadcast on April 14. He suggested that Butler's outlook on international affairs was dangerous, and chided him for his statement that "internationalism . . . must be sidetracked." He repeated his contention that if the United States chose to follow Butler's "mythical, painless policy of isolation . . . we will be plunging surely—and rather quickly—into another war."¹²

In a mailing dated April 15, Griswold stressed that he had taken his stand against isolationism and in favor of American participation in world affairs. He wrote that "my election would mean that Nebraska has turned its back on isolationism and desires to use our [*sic*] economic strength to fight the battle of peace. . . ."¹³

Butler responded to Griswold's attacks by suggesting that he had been misquoted in his acceptance speech. He denied stating that internationalism must be sidetracked, saying "I don't recall my exact words but I believe I said something to the effect that isolationism is no longer an issue. The main issue now is building a strong United States." He also denied Griswold's assertion that he was opposed to the British loan and explained that he actually favored making such transactions provided they were "on a business-like basis."¹⁴

Griswold attempted to tie his own image to that of other, more prominent Republicans who represented the internationalist element of the party. In January and again in March, he invited Harold Stassen to come to Nebraska in his behalf. He told Stassen:

You could do me a great deal of good . . . by coming into Nebraska and making a talk, saying that you feel that the Republican Party if it is to win in 1948 must push men like myself into positions of leadership. It could be based partly on the fact that I have some appeal to the returning veterans and partly on the fact that I am a younger, more progressive looking man.

I realize that this may not fit into your plans, but on the other hand, it might fit in exactly with your way of thinking for 1948. Certainly you will never get any help from men like Senator Butler.¹⁵

Stassen appeared in six Nebraska cities in support of Griswold's candidacy on May 31 and June 1. He suggested that the outcome of the senatorial contest in Nebraska would "have an impact on the policies of the Republican Party and of the United States." He stressed the need for vigorous, forward-



Senator Hugh Butler (right) on the campaign trail sometime in the 1940's visited with co-editor Richard Ross at the Chadron Record office.

looking, young leadership in the G.O.P. and the nation and said that he felt Griswold would make an outstanding senator. Stassen indicated that Nebraskans would reap four dividends through the election of Griswold: a better chance for lasting peace; an improved prospect for farm prices; a greater likelihood of high employment and avoidance of depressions; and, a better outlook for the Republican Party in 1948.¹⁶

Butler denounced the intervention of Stassen. He called Stassen's endorsement of Griswold "a purge attempt" and pointed to what he called the "New York people who . . . are so liberally financing both Griswold and Stassen." He suggested that these New York people favored the British loan and were interested in his political demise because of his opposition to it. Returning to the purge idea, he noted that "President Roosevelt once started a purge within his party. Maybe Mr. Stassen thinks he is even more powerful than was Roosevelt, but I doubt it."¹⁷

Both newspapers in Lincoln took editorial pot-shots at Butler's reaction to the Stassen visit. The *Star* suggested that his remarks were "so unlike Hugh Butler that one suspects Mr. Butler is letting something get under his hide."¹⁸ The *State Journal* editorialized that before Butler could legitimately challenge Stassen's support of Griswold, he should repudiate his own outside support, such as that announced by Gerald L. K. Smith. The paper concluded that the outside interference of Stassen was surely preferable to that of Smith.¹⁹

Other issues were largely muted during the campaign. Both candidates appealed to the rural voters of Nebraska. Both spoke in favor of irrigation and electrification projects, as well as soil and water conservation measures. Butler continued to voice his opposition to reciprocal tariffs, and indicated that although he had reluctantly supported the OPA during the war that he now felt the time had come to do away with wartime controls. Griswold branded Butler's OPA statement as "pussyfooting" and urged the prompt and complete abolition of all control measures. The *Lincoln Star* promptly called Griswold's OPA statement his "worst political mistake," and concluded that "Mr. Griswold cannot hope to improve upon Senator Butler as a reactionary or a conservative; Senator Butler has that title sewed up."²⁰ Otherwise, except for a brief flurry over a proposal by Editor W. H. Christenson of the *Omaha World-Herald* that the candidates debate the issues, a proposal finally rejected by Butler, the campaign continued to have one basic theme, that of the degree of international involvement by the United States.

As primary day neared, all indications pointed to a close contest. National news sources gave the contest extraordinary coverage for an off-year senatorial primary. The *Kansas City Star* wrote that the Nebraska primary provided "the first test at the polls of the alleged revival of the old isolationist spirit of the 1920's and 1930's in the Middle West." The *Star* concluded by asserting that "a Griswold victory . . . would be hailed as a victory for international collaboration; a Butler victory, the reverse."²¹ The *New York Times* indicated that it considered the contest more than that, that it was in effect a test of Stassen's ability to lead the liberal elements within the

Republican Party.²² Roscoe Drummond, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, suggested that the results of the primary would indicate the direction to be taken by the party in 1948. He called Griswold "one of the G.O.P.'s early, consistent, and outstanding internationalists." Referring to Butler's record in the Senate he said it "is an almost complete antithesis."²³ The press in Nebraska agreed. The *Omaha World-Herald* spoke for the majority by noting that "the outcome . . . will be considered an indication of the way the Republican Party will go nationally."²⁴

Those who had predicted a close contest were disappointed as Butler won an overwhelming primary victory. He received 87,589 votes while Griswold received 48,208. Butler carried ninety-one of the state's ninety-three counties, losing only two small, rural counties by close margins.²⁵

Was Butler's convincing primary victory an indication that isolationism had maintained or reassumed its firm hold on the Middle West? Several major newspapers claimed that this was the case. The *Portland Oregonian* declared that Butler's record on international affairs could hardly have been worse and concluded that "the American people, puzzled and disillusioned by the problems of internationalism, have been giving up the effort in great numbers and retiring into the old shell."²⁶ The *Kansas City Star* agreed that the vote indicated a trend "away from internationalism although not back to isolationism."²⁷ The *Chicago Tribune* gleefully printed Stassen's political obituary and claimed that as a result of Nebraska's repudiation of his brand of internationalism, his future as a political hopeful was ended.²⁸ The *San Diego Union* reported that Butler's victory would be interpreted as symptomatic of the sentiment in the Middle West "in favor of greater emphasis on American interests and lesser emphasis on trying to solve the problems of the whole world." It concluded that "in one important sector of the country it is no longer a political liability for a member of Congress frankly to put American interests first."²⁹

Those closely involved with the campaign disagreed. Ira Beynon, Griswold's campaign manager, minimized the isolationist-internationalist issue and stressed Butler's efficient campaign machinery plus his effective use of the one good term deserves another theme. He also indicated his belief that the

result was more conservative than isolationist and suggested that the support of Griswold by the CIO's Political Action Committee actually won votes for Butler because of Nebraska's traditional hostility to organized labor plus the labor unrest nationally in 1945-46.³⁰

Griswold, himself, told Herbert Brownell, Jr., that "the Republicans of Nebraska are so bitterly anti-New Deal that they seemingly did not want to nominate anyone who was touched with any degree of liberalism." Interestingly enough, Griswold suggested that this feeling was stronger on domestic issues than on international issues, although he did indicate his belief that the voters of Nebraska tended to favor Butler's position on international affairs.³¹

Griswold's clearest statement on the election result was in a report to Stassen. He wrote:

I was up against a well-financed, well-organized campaign. The opposition ran some advertising which was entirely untrue and they really got very "dirty."

The German communities, and . . . the farmers generally, voted for Butler and one of the dominant influences was the fact that I favored and he opposed the loan to Great Britain.

I cannot find anyone who wishes to be known as an isolationist—Hugh Butler and all the rest of them deny the charge. They do not, however, desire to make any sacrifices in behalf of international cooperation. When the government decided they needed to buy a lot of grain to send abroad, the attitude of the average farmer was that it was more necessary that grain be fed to livestock than that it be fed to starving humans. Butler followed that attitude. His political judgment was good but that is the only complimentary statement I can make on that subject.³²

Stassen's reply indicated his agreement with Griswold's analysis.³³

Butler was pleased with the overwhelming majority given him by the Republican voters of Nebraska. According to one of his closest assistants, Butler considered his victory more an endorsement of his record and appreciation of his past services than as a decision on any issue, national or international. He did indicate his displeasure with Griswold's entry into the race and with the efforts of some of the governor's supporters. In a post election letter to Senator Harlan Bushfield, Butler wrote: "Yes, Nebraska spoke and loud enough I hope so that *Life Magazine*, Drew Pearson, Walter Winchell, the CIO and the rest of the scoundrels can hear and understand it. Same for Stassen and his kind."³⁴

The issue of isolationism versus internationalism as a factor in the Republican senatorial primary in Nebraska in 1946 seems to



While touring World War I Allied countries in 1937, Dwight Griswold (in driver's seat) visited Interlochen, Switzerland. Others are Judge and Mrs. Earl Meyer (left), Mrs. Wade Martin, and Mrs. Griswold. . . (Below) Enroute to Athens on an Aid-to-Greece mission in 1948, Governor Griswold's plane stopped in North Africa. With the governor (left), are two unidentified persons; Mrs. Griswold, and Mrs. Earl Meyer.



have been exaggerated by the press. Butler's victory over Griswold was the result of many factors. There were those who voted for or against Hugh Butler because of his stand on the British loan or other matters of international concern, but had this issue been excluded, it seems clear that Butler would still have defeated Griswold. Nebraska's reluctance to refuse a man a second term was one significant factor in Butler's renomination. Butler's emphasis upon seniority, committee assignments, and his interest in the state's agricultural problems aided him substantially in the rural areas of the state where he had most feared Griswold's strength. General lack of interest in the primary and a small voter turn-out also hurt the governor's chance of upsetting the incumbent senator. The most substantial factor in Butler's decisive victory, however, was his vast, statewide political organization. Consisting of loyal and devoted friends as well as paid political organizers, the Butler organization performed efficiently. The Butler organization consisted of area and county managers across the state, with lesser "lieutenants" within each county. These key men, carefully cultivated during his first term, served him adroitly and advantageously. In addition to the statewide organization, Butler's organization coalesced around an inner circle of close friends and advisors, chiefly from Omaha. Even the state's party leaders had been selected from the Butler camp, due to some astute maneuvering during the first term. Although Butler relied heavily upon the advice of his friends, he knew that in a close election contest friends did not always perform as well as paid managers. He selected an Omaha radio announcer, Richard H. McCann, to direct his campaign on a salaried basis. McCann coordinated the activities of the over-all campaign group which sent out its bulletins and directives under the heading "Friends of Hugh Butler." McCann traveled widely and his three-man task force mentioned earlier laid the groundwork for the campaign long before the pre-primary convention.³⁵ In addition to McCann, Butler employed Earl Allen of Allen and Reynolds Advertising Company to procure and direct radio advertising, billboards, and other advertising devices.³⁶

Shortly after the pre-primary convention, McCann advised Butler to get the campaign started. He told Butler "Get the organization underway as fast as possible, AND THEN KEEP

THE MACHINE OILED AND GREASED AND ENCOURAGED [his caps]. . . . The way to lick the Griswold machine is with a better machine."³⁷ McCann's first memorandum to the area directors went out on April 1. The directors were advised to select competent county managers promptly; to have the county managers circulate Butler petitions and distribute campaign materials; to inform headquarters of any shifts in political sentiment in their areas; to make suggestions, criticisms, and recommendations; to gather potential speakers for Butler; and, to do what they could toward financing the campaign in their respective areas. A few days later, a similar directive went out, that time to the county managers, and praised them for consenting to serve in the organization.³⁸ These and succeeding memoranda indicate the intensity of the organization's efforts. After walking off with the honors at the pre-primary convention, the Butler forces successfully kept Governor Griswold on the defensive throughout the remainder of the campaign.

It seems clear, in retrospect, that Butler's victory was not due to his stand on international affairs but to the factors previously mentioned. Although some Republican voters of Nebraska may have been rejecting internationalism with their votes for Hugh Butler, many more of them were voting for an incumbent whose anti-New Deal philosophy suited them and whose political organization successfully thwarted the challenge of a popular, three-term governor.

NOTES

1. *Newsweek*, April 1, 1946, 23-24.
2. *New York Times*, March 21, 1946.
3. Karl Stefan to Herbert White, October 15, 1945, Karl Stefan MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society; Hugh Butler to Rollie G. Huffman, October 13, 1945, Hugh A. Butler MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society.
4. Hugh Butler to Donald Mapes, July 26, 1945, Butler MSS. Beynon's suggestion may have resulted from a tongue-in-cheek comment from Butler to Griswold in an earlier letter that they trade places. Hugh Butler to Dwight Griswold, January 23, 1945, Dwight Griswold MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society.
5. Dwight Griswold press release, December 27, 1945, Griswold MSS.
6. Richard McCann, Charles McCarl and Elizabeth Northrup to Hugh Butler, John Comstock and Ted H. Maenner, 18 letter-reports, February 18, 1946, to March 14, 1946, Butler MSS.

7. "Platform of the Nebraska Republican Party," March 19, 1946, Butler MSS.
8. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 21, 1946.
9. *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, March 20, 1946.
10. Hugh Butler address, March 19, 1946, Butler MSS.
11. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 27, 1946.
12. Dwight Griswold radio address transcript, April 11, 1946, Griswold MSS.; *Omaha World-Herald*, April 15, 1946.
13. Dwight Griswold to Mrs. F. A. Brubb, *et al* (form letter), April 14, 1946, Griswold MSS.
14. *Lincoln Star*, April 16, 1946; *Omaha World-Herald*, April 16, 1946. Butler's advisers apparently felt this issue was popular, for they kept urging him to use it. Ted Maenner to Hugh Butler, May 3, 1946, Butler MSS.
15. Dwight Griswold to Harold E. Stassen, March 7, 1946, Griswold MSS.
16. *Omaha World-Herald*, May 31, 1946, and June 2, 1946; *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, June 2, 1946.
17. *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, June 1, 1946; *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 1, 1946.
18. *Lincoln Star*, June 4, 1946.
19. *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, June 5, 1946.
20. *Lincoln Star*, April 24, 1946.
21. *Kansas City Star*, June 8, 1946.
22. *New York Times*, June 10, 1946.
23. *Christian Science Monitor* clipping, no date, Butler MSS.
24. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 10, 1946.
25. "Official Report of the Nebraska State Canvassing Board," 1946. Griswold carried Brown (465-453) and Dakota (642-513) counties.
26. *Portland Oregonian*, June 13, 1946.
27. *Kansas City Star*, June 12, 1946.
28. *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1946.
29. *San Diego Union*, June 14, 1946.
30. Ira D. Beynon to Governor William H. Vanderbilt, June 14, 1946, Beynon MSS., Nebraska State Historical Society. Ira D. Beynon, interview with author, July 16, 1965.
31. Dwight Griswold to Herbert Brownell, Jr., June 18, 1946; Dwight Griswold to Claude Canaday, June 26, 1946, Griswold MSS.
32. Dwight Griswold to Harold E. Stassen, June 26, 1946, Griswold MSS.
33. Harold E. Stassen to Dwight Griswold, August 10, 1946, Griswold MSS.
34. Hugh Butler to Senator Harlan Bushfield, June 12, 1946, Butler MSS.
35. Richard H. McCann, interview with author, October 4, 1965. See also footnote 6.
36. Earl J. Allen to Hugh Butler, April 20, 1946, Butler MSS.
37. Richard H. McCann to Hugh Butler, April 4, 1946, Butler MSS.
38. "Friends of Hugh Butler" to Ivan D. Evans, *et al*, April 1, 1946, Butler MSS. Richard H. McCann to (form letter), no date, Richard H. McCann MSS., viewed through courtesy of Richard H. McCann.