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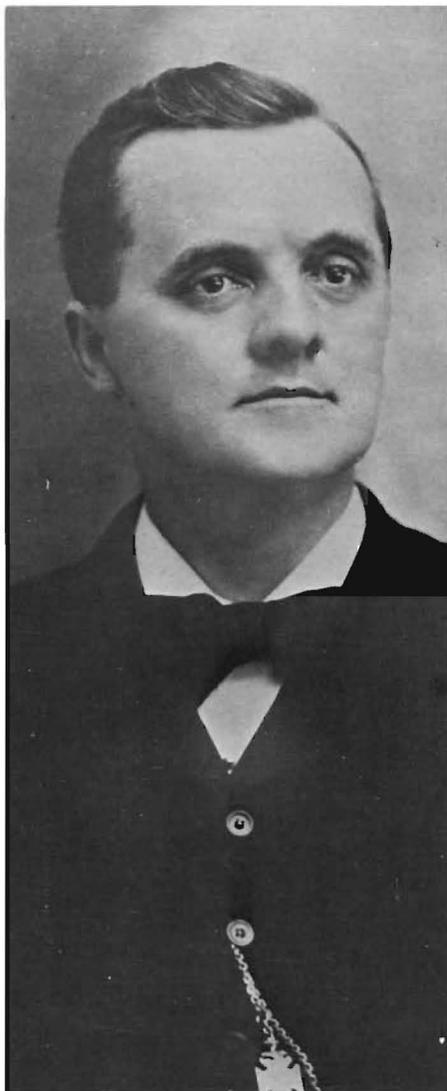
Article Summary: This article is a brief descriptive of George W Norris' beliefs and character. Content is a paper presented July 1, 1988, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to the National Endowment for the Humanities Biographical Study Group supervised by Professor James A Rawley et al.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Robert Ingersoll, Harry D Strunk, Louis D Brandeis, Ellison D Smith, John J McSwain, Kenneth D McKellar, Samuel D McReynolds, Miles C Allgood, William B Oliver, Joseph L Hill, Edward B Almon, Franklin D Roosevelt

Photographs / Images: Norris during his first congressional campaign; "Spider Web of Wall Street" photo with Norris; the George W Norris House in McCook, now a branch museum of the Nebraska State Historical Society; Signing of the Norris-Hill Bill in 1933 with Franklin D Roosevelt and other members of Congress identified [see names above]

GEORGE W. NORRIS:



Norris during his first congressional campaign. (NSHS-N855-58)

Richard Lowitt, biographer of George W. Norris, is a visiting professor at the University of Oklahoma on leave from Iowa State University.

This paper was presented July 1, 1988, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to the National Endowment for the Humanities Biographical Study Group supervised by Professor James A. Rawley et al.

A REFLECTIVE VIEW

By Richard Lowitt

In his maiden speech to the Congress in March 1904, Norris said, "It is at the rural fireside that virtue, morality, and patriotism have reached their highest state." While he never relinquished this view, neither did he in future years continually reiterate it, and he rarely, if ever, cast aspersions upon urban Americans. Aside from obvious racist remarks about the Japanese, I do not recall any racist, ethnic, or religious comments in the vast body of written material — letters, speeches, articles, etc. — that I have reviewed. For a person who was an avid reader of the writings of the leading agnostic of the nineteenth century, Robert Ingersoll, and who never joined (let alone attended) church, it is equally remarkable that most of his friends and neighbors in Beaver City and McCook, as well as citizens throughout Nebraska, never made much of this fact. Equally interesting is the fact that over the years, some of America's leading clerics supported many of the stands he took on major issues.

Though he received support and favorable attention from citizens throughout the country — indeed his correspondence files probably include more letters from citizens outside of Nebraska than from residents of the state — Norris was anything but an urbane, cosmopolitan member of Congress. His travels outside of the continental United States included brief trips to Europe and Hawaii, while a member of the House, and to the Panama Canal Zone early in his senatorial

career. He simply did not take much satisfaction in congressional junkets or the Washington social scene. He preferred to spend his time with legislative business or relaxing with the people he knew best — his family and friends in McCook, at his Wisconsin vacation home, or at a reserved table in the Senate dining room where, munching a cheese sandwich and drinking a glass of milk, he discussed business with like-minded colleagues. Yet because he was comfortable and secure within himself he could, without oratorical flourishes, by speaking simply and directly, attract and influence audiences throughout the United States. In short, Norris was nothing more nor less than a resident of Main Avenue in McCook. America in many ways for him was merely McCook written large. His values and his perspective were cast and refracted through an angle of vision based in McCook and rural America.

What was the scope of this angle of vision that determined how he looked at issues and functioned on the national scene? At the outset it should be noted that economic and political ideas are neither pure abstractions nor fixed realities. They are conceptions held by individuals who seek in some degree to give them meaning in the world they see, experience, and comprehend. Basic to Norris's outlook was a rural, small-town vision — articulated in an America that when he reached Washington in 1903, was already increasingly an urban, industrial nation, one in which technology and

bureaucracy were integrating, centralizing, and supposedly making more efficient all aspects of American life. As a result, rural Americans like Norris were being displaced and relegated to the economic fringes and social backwaters. The nation was modernizing, and rural America was responding more slowly than other sectors.

This situation provides the backdrop for Norris's career. He early recognized that Nebraska farmers who had to rely on the railroad were in effect its victims. Everything they purchased had both profits and freight costs factored into the price. Everything they sold had freight rates and commission charges deducted from what they received. And when railroad executives in Chicago or Minneapolis in the name of efficiency shut down branch or spur lines, rural Nebraskans were further isolated from the main currents of American life. Similar developments were evident on small town main streets as some local merchants and businessmen were displaced or suffered severely from competition with huge retail establishments in Chicago and elsewhere, who through mail-order catalogs and a parcel post system could provide customers in McCook with imitations of the latest styles at the same price or even cheaper than the Main Street merchant. And soon thereafter, many local businessmen would lose their independence and become managers or employees of chain stores or franchises, whose basic decisions were usually made in distant urban centers. Norris, who before going to Congress served as a district judge, also recognized that the same was true of the dispensation of justice when litigation came under federal jurisdiction. Individuals would have to travel usually to Lincoln or Omaha, secure the services of a lawyer, and contest with a corporation, whose high-priced and experienced attorneys could delay a case, making it exceedingly difficult for the small-town litigant without costly legal talent to win.

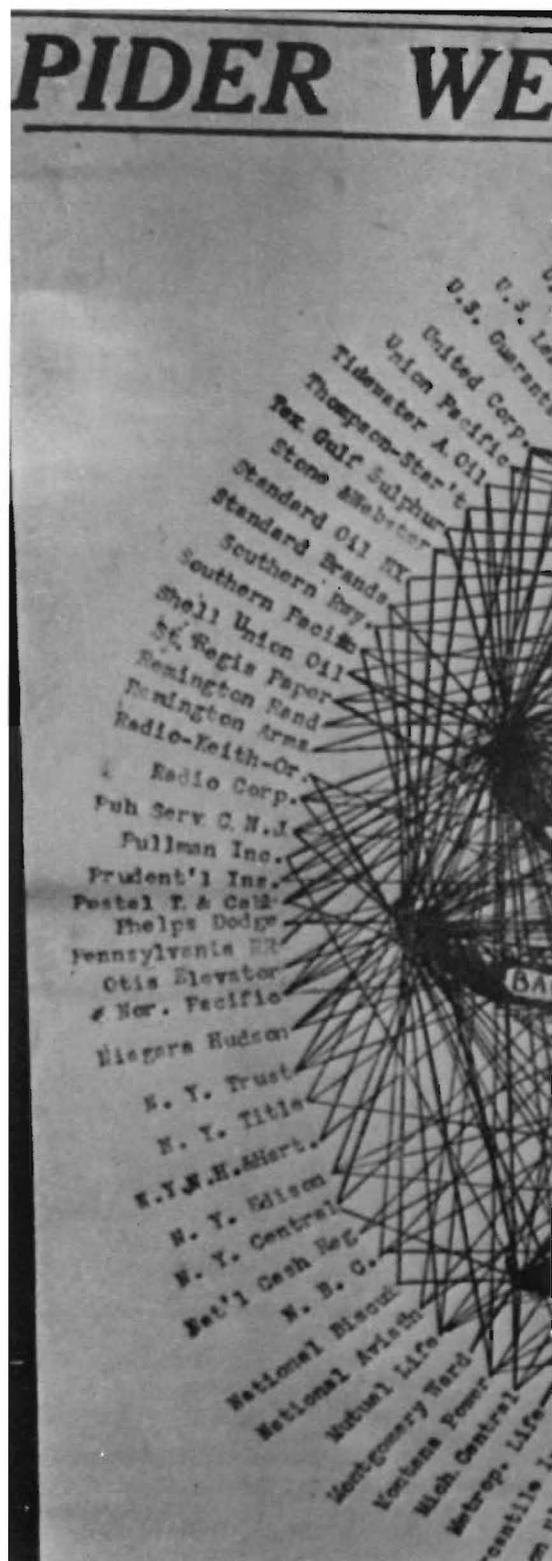
It was situations such as these that

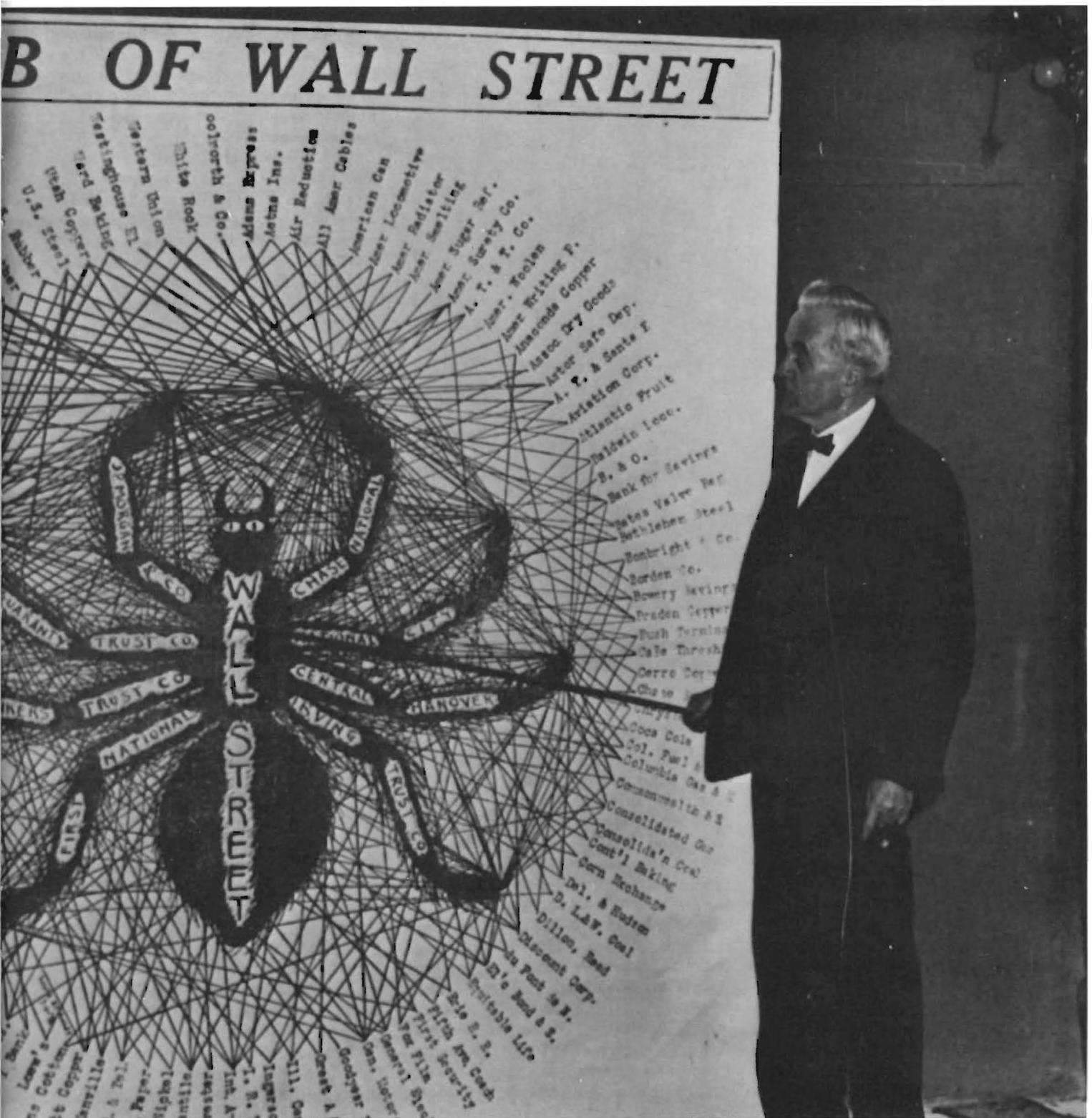
made Norris a progressive, suspicious of great wealth in the form of corporations, and aware of inequities in the judicial system. He recognized, as did Theodore Roosevelt and others, that states' rights and local or state governments could not easily rectify these problems. Though he was not happy about it, Norris quickly realized that only federal authority could regulate, curb, or modify the inequities he saw inflicted on his constituents in McCook and throughout Nebraska. And in the 1920s when he came to fully understand the dimensions of what he called "the power trust" — huge private utility companies involved in regional or even national networks — he was willing to displace them with public power. Furthermore, he came to view a river valley in terms of multipurpose usage — to provide flood control, irrigation, electricity to rural customers, recreational opportunities, navigation, and more — something no private company could provide.

As he matured in public service, Norris came to realize that people throughout the United States were similar to those in McCook and Nebraska. To be sure, their problems and concerns were not always similar, but all too often in matters that came to his attention, people were being oppressed by forces, usually huge corporate enterprises, over which they could exert no control. And all too often they were victims of programs and policies which enriched a favored few at the expense of the many — which provided in many instances inferior or inadequate services at exorbitant prices — and which exploited customers and employees in ways that shocked and at times angered him.

He was shocked and angered because these practices were making a mockery of the values he cherished along with his neighbors in McCook and the surrounding countryside.

As a progressive Norris was suspicious of great wealth in the form of banks or corporations. (NSHS-N855-40)







The George W. Norris House in McCook is now a branch museum of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Courtesy of McCook Daily Gazette.

These were traditional nineteenth century American values: the desirability of individualism, private enterprise, the work ethic, and local responsibility. As a progressive member of Congress, he was willing to muster the power of government to assist the victims of this rampant corporate system. To the extent that he was successful, he believed he was helping to preserve the traditional small-town, rural values he cherished.

To be sure, not everyone agreed with Norris. Not everyone in McCook agreed with him. Harry D. Strunk and the *Daily Gazette* opposed him. His secretary, Ray McCarl, walked out on him in 1918 in the midst of a critical cam-

paigned for election to a second term in the United States Senate; and John Cordeal, another close friend in McCook, broke with him over both personal and political issues. And there were others. Nevertheless, most residents of McCook, Nebraska, and of the United States, even when they disagreed with some of his views, respected and admired his integrity, his courage, his candor in taking unpopular stands on critical issues, and his refusal to back away from service to his constituents. George W. Norris became famous for the battles he lost — but he lived to see most of his causes prevail. And throughout his career he never lost his sense of place and responsibility to

the community and the state whose citizens from 1902 until the election of 1942, sent him to serve in the nation's capital. When the voters would have no more of him, he returned to his home on Main Avenue to live out his remaining days.

Agriculture, of course, was central to the well being of his constituents. In farming, as in other Western business endeavors, physical labor and reward were often separated but never quite divorced. Norris recognized that as agriculture became commercialized, it became more directly tied to the non-farm economy and to foreign trade. It became more dependent on situations and events occurring beyond the borders of the old Fifth Congressional District and the state of Nebraska. Farmers with no control over the weather and little control over their costs or returns fell under the sway of national and world economies. By the 1920s the plight of Nebraska farmers, after years of war-induced prosperity, became increasingly desperate as the dilemma of overproduction, stimulated by improved technology and relatively easy access to credit, combined with declining prices. Norris, increasingly depressed by the economic predicament of his constituents in the 1920s, sought ways to further develop both urban and overseas markets, but he never could convince either his colleagues or the Republican administrations of the validity of his views. Ever the realist, he recognized the necessity of compromise in the political market place and supported measures he knew could not fully resolve the farmers' dilemma. By the 1930s, along with most rural leaders, he was willing to accept production controls and mild inflationary measures to provide some relief to desperate farmers, a handful of whom in Nebraska were turning to Communism in the hope of meliorating their lot. Norris understood that both here and abroad, Communism attracted miserable, oppressed individuals, not because of any ideological conviction, but because

George W. Norris

governments seemingly ignored their problems and in too many instances endorsed or favored policies, such as the tariff and lenient taxation, that benefited individuals and corporations already well off.

Like Louis D. Brandeis, whose appointment to the Supreme Court he endorsed (one of two Republican senators to do so), Norris was concerned about the virtues and vices of size. Family farms and small business units, comparable to those on Main Avenue, were normal and most satisfactory to Norris. But by the 1930s, with the creation of TVA, the Tri-County and other Nebraska public power systems (all headquartered in the regions they served), as well as the unicameral legislature, Norris had become more

concerned with administrative processes that sought rationality and efficient service rather than with punitive actions that characterized some of his earlier responses to economic injustice. Norris was always less concerned with punishment than with making the system work more effectively, be it in the economic realm or in the political arena; in the House of Representatives by transferring some of the Speaker's authority to other committees and to the House itself; in the Congress and the presidency by eliminating the lame duck session and by inaugurating the president at the same time the new Congress convened; and in Nebraska through a unicameral legislature. Ending privilege in government was essential if the legislature was to accurately

reflect the hopes and aspirations of the American people.

It was this same concern about the vices of bigness and the virtues of community and family farms that led Norris to strongly oppose, until the barbarism of rampant fascism in the 1930s, what he considered dangerous ventures in the field of foreign policy; ventures that benefited the few at the expense of the many, that benefited corporate America while disrupting communities and breaking up cohesive families. Given his angle of vision in opposing these overseas ventures, he in no way saw national security threatened. It took courage to oppose America's entrance into World War I, yet he didn't hesitate even though at the time he thought it meant the end of his political

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's signing of the Norris-Hill Bill in 1933 is applauded by the bill's author, Senator Norris (right), and by other supporters of the Muscle Shoals development program: Senator Ellison D. Smith (left) and Representative John J. McSwain, South Carolina; Senators Kenneth D. McKellar and Samuel D. McReynolds, Tennessee; Representatives Miles C. Allgood, William B. Oliver, Joseph L. Hill, and Senator Edward B. Almon, Alabama. (NSHS-N855-39. International News Photo)



career. While he came reluctantly to support American foreign policy in the late 1930s, he never could bring himself to vote for the draft, and he was terribly distressed at the disruption it brought to farm families before effective guidelines were defined after his defeat in the 1942 elections.

Until his election in 1902, Nebraska's old Fifth Congressional District had little political stability: Republicans, Populists, and Democrats vied with one another and formed coalitions that changed the representation at almost every election. Though a regular Republican in his early years in Congress, Norris quickly shed his partisanship and in his last two campaigns ran as an independent without any party label. Thanks to his independent stands, he lost by 1910 all political patronage and conducted his campaigns with a minimum of funds and little organizational support. Republican leaders either ignored him or through the use of money and the influence of selfish leadership, as in 1930, actively sought his defeat. But his constituents (sometimes, as in the early campaigns, by a slim majority) never — with the exception of his last campaign where extenuating circumstances prevailed — let him down. By speaking directly to the people on Main Avenues throughout Nebraska, Norris was continuously reelected from 1902 through his 1936 campaign for a fifth term in the United States Senate. That speaks well for the Nebraska electorate and indicates, I think, that he reflected the virtues and values of his rural small-town constituency. Norris usually carried Douglas County though he never seriously campaigned in Omaha, Nebraska's only metropolitan area. He

usually delivered one, or possibly two, speeches there but never walked its streets, stayed in its hotels, chatted with local citizens, or visited its editors, as he did in most Nebraska communities during a reelection campaign.

Expounding the virtues and values that prevailed in McCook and in rural Nebraska, Norris enjoyed one of the outstanding public careers in our political history. An individual with roots deep in nineteenth century America, he left a remarkable stamp upon the America of the first half of the twentieth century. Few legislators, if any, in our history can match his record of achievement. And he did it largely through the force of his logic, through patience and reasoning, in simple direct language, convincing his constituents, his colleagues, and millions of Americans of the validity of his views.

Though he belonged to no church, Norris espoused essentially nineteenth century Christian values: love for his fellow man, humility, sacrifice, and sense of community. These values, beginning to wane as the nineteenth century came to an end, were self-evident in Norris's behavior as a public servant and as a private individual. For Norris, for most of his friends and neighbors in McCook, and for many of his constituents and admirers, wealth did not replace work and the mere possession of things did not sink one into a morass of materialism. His career can be seen as that of a realistic dreamer who continually sought to alleviate human suffering and inequities. He sought to improve the lot of the average citizen by making government more effective and by providing

individuals more opportunities to improve their lot in life, or at least to make it a bit more comfortable. That he did not fully succeed should be taken for granted; that he accomplished as much as he did is truly remarkable. Indeed, it is to be doubted if any single member of Congress accomplished as much as George W. Norris.

Norris accepted the hope that the American dream shared with all utopian promises — the hope of improvement, of unfolding opportunity for generation after generation. It was also part of the American dream that this opportunity was to be available without significant interference by the state; it was to be created by individual efforts at self improvement and was predicated upon a belief in private property accompanied by strong community ties. Democracy for Norris began at home. But by the turn of the century local autonomy had become the basis — not of opportunity for all, but of privilege for some. As a progressive Norris came to see federal authority as a means of enhancing democracy while at the same time preserving in a meaningful way aspects of local autonomy. In short, he believed in the benefits of active government in the public interest, but he also celebrated the free, self-reliant individual.

In 1912 in a tribute to a deceased colleague and friend in the House of Representatives, Norris uttered the following remarks which, I think, can be applied equally well to him:

His country was his idol, his conscience was his master, and humanity was his God. He never hesitated to defend what he believed to be right, and he always denounced evil wherever he found it.