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Article Summary: Butler attained wealth and success as a farmer and businessman before he sought political office in his sixties. Throughout his life he had made decisions with an eye to his future as a politician.

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Photographs / Images: Senator Butler, Doane Senior Academy class of 1896, A L Johnson's Crete Mills during an ice jam on the Big Blue River, Butler awarding the Fay Johnson Butler Scholarship in 1946



Senator Hugh A. Butler



THE MAKING OF A SENATOR
THE EARLY LIFE OF HUGH BUTLER

By JUSTUS F. PAUL

SENATOR Hugh Alfred Butler was one of Nebraska's most well-known, but least understood politicians. The voters of Nebraska who elected Butler to the United States Senate three times knew him as a successful farmer from Cambridge or as a successful businessman from Omaha. Across the state, he was also known as a civic leader, a Christian gentleman, and a philanthropist.

Hugh Butler was all of these things, and the voters of Nebraska respected and revered him for them. But he was more. He was an able politician and a man of determination, resolved to fight for those things in which he believed and to do what was necessary to elect himself and other Republican candidates. Once in office, he spared neither effort nor money in assuring that he would be reelected.

Much is known about Hugh Butler's life and career after his election to the Senate in 1940. However, little is known about the first sixty-two years of his life. Butler sought

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political office only after attaining wealth and achieving success in various other occupations and endeavors. In these earlier efforts, he was aware of the political possibilities inherent in his actions and most of his decisions were made with an eye to a political future.

Hugh Butler's story might be called "The Horatio Alger Story of Nebraska." From humble beginnings, Butler rose to a position of political importance and financial security. He was born on February 28, 1878, at Calhoun, Harrison County, Iowa, the son of Harvey Gibson and Ida Wills Butler. Little is known about Butler's ancestry except that his father's family had an Irish-English-Scottish lineage and that his mother's family was of English ancestry. Butler's father



The Doane Senior Academy Class of 1896. Butler is seated in the front row, second from the left.

was born September 20, 1846, at Salem, Sangamon County, Illinois, and his mother was born at Missouri Valley, Iowa, on January 27, 1860. Prior to settling in Illinois, Harvey Butler's ancestors had farmed in South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Ida Wills' family originally settled in New England. The Butler family was typical of nineteenth-century farm households. According to Hugh Butler, only one member of the family had succeeded in public life—his great uncle William Butler. ¹ "The most distinguished member of our family was Treasurer of the State of Illinois at the time Abraham Lincoln was coming up. In fact, Lincoln lived with William Butler and his wife, Mary, before he was married."²

In 1884 Harvey Butler moved his family and belongings to a homestead south of Cambridge, Nebraska. After several years of hardship, he took a position in Cambridge as a flour mill employee. Life in Cambridge seemed promising when Harvey Butler was suddenly faced with a family to raise on his own, after his wife passed away on November 12, 1891. Later, Hugh Butler wrote, "Mother passed away in 1891 as a result of the pioneering experiences of those days. We had corn bread, sorghum, all home made, milk from a borrowed cow and kept warm by burning cow-chips collected by us children."³

The children, Hugh, Helen, Guy, and Frank, struggled to continue their schooling and worked at odd jobs to help meet the family's bills. As Hugh neared completion of his education at Cambridge High School, he became increasingly interested in a career with the railroads. His neighbor, Jack Pryor, encouraged him in this interest, but urged him to complete his education first.

Butler's chance to further his education came through his friendship with Rev. Howard S. MacAyeal, the Congregational minister in Cambridge. It was Mr. MacAyeal

1. Benjamin F. Sylvester and Ruth M. Sylvester, *A Man and His College: The Butler-Doane Story* (Crete, Nebr.: Doane College Press, 1954), 3.

2. Hugh Butler to Mrs. Harry Hines, March 26, 1954, Hugh A. Butler MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereafter cited as Butler MSS.

3. Hugh Butler to George W. Norris, February 20, 1932, George W. Norris MSS, Library of Congress. Hereafter cited as Norris MSS, LC.

who suggested that he enter competition for a scholarship to Doane College in Crete. The contest was based not on past academic achievement or promise, but rather upon the sale of subscriptions to the church magazine. Butler entered the contest with determination and carefully planned his attack. His strategy was simple: to sell the magazine not merely to those who were members of the Congregational Church but to all people with whom he came into contact.⁴

Successful in his first competitive venture, Butler entered Doane Academy in the fall of 1895 at the age of seventeen. In the fall of 1896, he entered Doane College. To supplement his scholarship, he worked at various jobs, clerked in a grocery store, served as a janitor, and rang the college bell.⁵ In addition to pursuing the classical course of study, Butler was active in athletics and other campus activities.⁶

In later years, he often remarked that he had received "a sound education in the value of a dollar" while at Doane. Fiscal responsibility and economy in government were basic elements in his later political philosophy. Butler also developed his interest in the Republican Party while at Doane. "I became a very ardent Republican during the days that I was going to college. . . ."⁷

Butler earned his Bachelor of Science degree in 1900. He hoped to enter the University of Nebraska College of Law, but the cost proved prohibitive. Instead, Butler obtained a position with his other interest, the Burlington railroad. He was assigned to a surveying crew at a salary of thirty-five dollars per month.

On February 5, 1903, Butler married his college sweetheart, Fay Johnson. For five years the young couple

4. Sylvester, *A Man and His College*, 31-35.

5. Anna Rothe (ed.), *Current Biography*, 1950 (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1951), 77-78.

6. *The Doane College Record*, II (1892-1902). Butler's course work included such subjects as German, Vergil, *Anabasis*, *Iliad*, Ovid, Greek, chemistry, trigonometry, astronomy, literature, and economics.

7. Hugh Butler to R. W. Skelton, March 7, 1949, Butler MSS.

lived the nomadic life of a railroad family. Although Butler was successful in this endeavor, he knew that Fay wanted a more settled life. He knew, too, that if he desired a future in public service, he must begin to broaden his contacts.

Thus in June, 1908, the Butlers moved to Curtis, Nebraska, where Hugh had decided to invest some of his hard-earned money in the milling industry. A. L. Johnson, a distant relative of Mrs. Butler and president of the Crete Mills, was receptive to the idea of beginning a new branch of the business in Curtis and provided the additional funds Butler needed to engage in this new venture. Butler became the manager of the Curtis Mills with his father-in-law, Frank Johnson, as miller.

While in Curtis, Butler took an active part in civic affairs. He served in his first political office at this time as a member of the Curtis Town Board.⁸ While on the board, Butler led efforts to build municipal light and water plants and a sanitary sewage system. His major achievement, however, and the one of which he remained most proud, was his successful fight to establish the Nebraska School of Agriculture at Curtis.⁹

It was also at Curtis that tragedy first struck the Butlers. Their infant son, Lawrence Hugh, died a few weeks after birth. The baby's death, coupled with the death years later of his older son, Robert Johnson, who was twelve years of age, influenced the later life of Hugh Butler. He decided to invest the money which he would have used to educate his own sons in the education of others at his alma mater, Doane College. The tragic death of Mrs. Butler in 1941, following a freak highway mishap, left Butler without a family. In the loneliness he suffered as a result of these losses, he found solace in his service to Doane College and, after his election victory of 1940, in his senatorial career. For the remainder of

8. *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, August 16, 1940; Sylvester, *A Man and His College*, 81-82.

9. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 22, 1940.

his life, Doane and the Senate of the United States served to partially fill this vacuum.¹⁰

Butler left Curtis in 1913 to become manager of the Crete Mills. In Crete he again became active in civic affairs, but his desire for recognition and independence was not fulfilled in his new position. At the age of forty, he made his move. He became a partner in the Dawson Grain Company of Omaha, but for Hugh Butler, being the junior partner was no more satisfactory than being the manager of the Crete Mills. In 1918, after only six months with the Dawson Company, he exercised his option to dissolve the partnership.

Butler then contacted a young army private, J. Leroy Welsh, whom he had met while in Curtis. Butler suggested that the two form a partnership and establish their own grain company. Welsh was skeptical, especially of the money that it would take to get into the established grain trade. Butler, who had accumulated about fifteen thousand dollars, agreed to finance both shares of the partnership, and Welsh finally agreed to the arrangement.¹¹

The Butler-Welsh Grain Company provided Butler with a vehicle to establish new contacts which later were of great value to his political career. He and Welsh alternated road trips, one man always remaining in the Omaha office. In this way, Butler soon came to know and to be known by most of

10. John M. Brenneman, *et al.*, *A History of Doane College* (Crete, Nebr.: Doane College Press, 1957), 258–261; Sylvester, *A Man and His College*, 107–133. Estimates of the actual amount of Butler's support to Doane vary. His estate left Doane "a figure considerably over half a million dollars," according to *A History of Doane College* (p. 261). In addition to this amount, Butler had earlier provided for the establishment of the Fay Johnson Butler Memorial Scholarship Fund. Through the years, he also made regular (and some irregular) contributions to sustain the college, especially during the hard times of the thirties and early forties.

11. J. Leroy Welsh, president, Butler-Welsh Grain Company. Personal interview with the author, Omaha, Nebraska, November 11, 1965; Sylvester, *A Man and His College*, 92–93; *Omaha World-Herald*, September 22, 1940. Capital of thirty thousand dollars was accrued. Hugh Butler got ten thousand dollars in loans from two of his former partners and invested about eight thousand dollars of his own, plus from fifteen hundred to three thousand dollars of Welsh's money, depending upon the sources, which vary. Welsh himself said he had invested about fifteen hundred dollars, as far as he could recall.

the grain dealers and elevator operators throughout the state, as well as by many farmers. In later political campaigns, Butler's strength in the towns and villages around the state was greatly aided by these contacts.

The Butler-Welsh Company was successful from its very inception. By the time Butler left the company to pursue his political ambitions, it had become "one of the largest home-owned concerns on the Omaha Grain Exchange, with one hundred employes */sic/* in the busy season, . . . reputed to be worth 200 thousand dollars."¹²

Welsh later recalled that shortly after the first successful year of the new company's operation, Butler suggested to him that he, Butler, would be turning the business over to Welsh soon in order that he might be able to go into politics. Welsh's reaction to this suggestion was to tell Butler that he should not get involved in that "mess." To this, Butler replied that it was because politics was a "mess" that he felt an obligation to become involved.¹³

Butler subdued this early impulse and continued to develop his state-wide reputation and connections. He strengthened his ties to the farming community by investing money in farm mortgages. In 1924, foreclosure of two of these mortgages brought Butler two farms, one of 220 acres and the other, 320 acres. Butler and his brother Frank formed a partnership with Alfred Frandsen, who was hired on a share basis as operator. From this beginning the Butler brothers and Frandsen ranch of eighteen hundred acres was developed by September of 1939.¹⁴ Started as an ordinary

12. *Omaha World-herald*, September 22, 1940. A statement on the Butler-Welsh Company showed tangible net worth of two hundred thousand dollars on November 30, 1937, with a decrease to \$177,793 on July 31, 1938, and a recovery to \$189,503 on December 30, 1939. This statement credited Butler himself with an entire worth in excess of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, including investment in the company, shares in farming and ranching enterprises in the Cambridge area, other Nebraska land holdings, and around twenty thousand dollars in marketable securities. Robert LeRoy Cochran MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereafter cited as Cochran MSS.

13. J. Leroy Welsh, interview, November 11, 1965.

14. *Nebraska Farmer*, LXXXI, No. 18 (September 9, 1939), 6.

farm without livestock, Frandsen developed the ranch into a large-scale producer of livestock. According to a Lincoln newspaper, "Butler Brother[s] and Frandsen are big enough to have lovestock [*sic*] on the market every we[e]k in th[e] year. Their annual cattle turnover is 1,500 to 1,800 head, around 50 carloads."¹⁵ Butler was so pleased with the success of this venture that he later added an irrigated farm of four hundred acres in the Republican River Valley to his holdings. Thus was developed the image of "Butler the farmer" so adeptly used in his later campaigns.

In addition to his image as a farmer and a grain man, Butler began to make himself known in other ways. He became active in Rotary International in the early twenties and later served as District Governor, as a member of the International Board, and as a member of the Executive Committee of the Board.¹⁶ He was a member of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Odd Fellows, Modern Woodmen of America, Masons, Omaha Country Club, and Omaha Athletic Club (where he later maintained his legal voting residence), and served for a time as director for the Y.M.C.A. and for the Salvation



15. *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, August 16, 1940.

16. "Hugh Butler," biographical material for publicity, Butler MSS; Citizens' National Committee, "A CNC Profile: Hugh Butler," *Washington Close-Up* (November, 1943), 3.

Army.¹⁷ Butler served a term as chairman of the Board of Trustees of First Central Congregational Church of Omaha and served on the Doane College Board of Trustees from

17. Sara M. Baldwin (ed.), *Who's Who in Omaha, 1928* (Omaha: Robert M. Baldwin Crop., 1928), 37; Nebraska Press Association, *Who's Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Press Association, 1940), 312.



A. L. Johnson's Crete Mills, as photographed during an ice jam on the Big Blue River.

1917 to 1954. This interest in First Central Church and in Doane College resulted in his selection as State Moderator of the Congregational Church in 1934-1935. ¹⁸

Butler's plan throughout the twenties and early thirties was to build his political fences without becoming directly involved in politics. In this way he hoped to make numerous friends without alienating the professional politicians by appearing to be overly ambitious. In this endeavor he was most successful. By 1929, when he was elected president of the Omaha Grain Exchange, he had earned a statewide reputation for fairness and honesty in the grain business, as well as a considerable reputation in agricultural and civic circles. ¹⁹

As president of the Omaha Grain Exchange, Butler became involved in political affairs through the Exchange's opposition to the Federal Farm Board. The Nebraska Republican Party had been severely split since the mid-twenties over farm policy. The party had both liberal and conservative elements, but the split ran deeper than this. It was a struggle "between those who wanted to keep Nebraska safe for the Republican Administration and its farm plan and those who supported the McNary-Haugen bill." ²⁰

The basic principle of the various McNary-Haugen bills involved the concept of a government corporation which would purchase sufficient quantities of agricultural products to raise the domestic price to a specified level. This corporation would then sell the surplus abroad at the world market price, subsidizing the difference between the domestic market price and the world market price through the collection of an equalization fee charged to producers. ²¹

18. Mrs. Alma Taylor, secretary, Nebraska Conference of the United Church of Christ, to the author, January 28, 1966.

19. *Omaha's Own Magazine*, IV (December, 1929), 17.

20. James A. Stone, "Agrarian Ideology and the Farm Problem in Nebraska State Politics with Special Reference to Northeast Nebraska, 1920-1933" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1960), 315; see 314 ff. for further discussion of the split between the McNary-Haugenites and the administration forces.

21. Norman L. Zucker, "George W. Norris: Progressive from the Plains," *Nebraska History*, XLV (June, 1964), 160-161.

Butler favored the two-price system this approach would have produced.²²

Former Governor Samuel McKelvie was the chief spokesman opposing this plan. Because of his position as editor of the largest farm newspaper in the state, the *Nebraska Farmer*, McKelvie also commanded a wide audience. Agitation over the McNary-Haugen bills did not die with the vetoes of the bills by President Coolidge, and leaders of the movement in Nebraska worked diligently for the nomination of Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois as the Republican presidential candidate in 1928. Republican Governor Adam McMullen, a leading proponent of McNary-Haugenism, "did yeoman service for the cause by speaking in the midwest for McNary-Haugen and for Lowden."²³ Their efforts were unsuccessful.

President Hoover followed the lead of his predecessor in denouncing the plan. Hoover proposed to aid agriculture through cooperative marketing. Instead of resolving the controversy in Nebraska's political circles, the passage of Hoover's Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 only served to exacerbate the controversy. Former Governor McKelvie, who became a member of the Federal Farm Board created by the act, urged its acceptance through editorials in the *Nebraska Farmer*. Fear of governmental regulation of the grain trade brought opposition from many quarters, including such strange bed fellows as the Democratic press, the Farmers' Union, and the Omaha Grain Exchange.²⁴ The Grain Exchange freely admitted sponsoring advertisements denouncing the work of the Board. Playing upon the themes of individualism, local control, and Eastern domination, these advertisements spared no words in their denunciation of this "socialistic action" of the federal government.²⁵

22. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 22, 1940.

23. Stone, "Agrarian Ideology," 332-333.

24. *Ibid.*, 351-352, 357. Stone further states that only the Nebraska Farm Bureau gave the plan wholehearted support. The other principals, whom Stone refers to as "neo-Populists," viewed with alarm the possibilities inherent in the development of "big government."

25. *Ibid.*, 360.

McKelvie responded to these attacks by the Grain Exchange and demanded an investigation of its activities in this area. On October 17, 1930, the Federal Trade Commission ordered a preliminary investigation of McKelvie's charges that "the 'organized grain trade' is engaged in circulating propaganda against the board."²⁶

Hugh Butler, as president of the Omaha Grain Exchange for 1930, found himself in the middle of this issue. He charged that "fear of government" was a major cause of the depression. He called the Agricultural Marketing Act "one of the greatest blunders of all time," and stated that the Farm Board "is but a child, and has inherited its unfortunate aspects from its parents . . . who were the self-seeking politicians and bureaucrats who create issues for the government which have very little to do with the nation's welfare, but have much to do with the outcome of the next election."²⁷

Butler gained national as well as local prominence through his attacks on the Farm Board. On October 15, 1930, he was elected president of the Grain and Feed Dealer's National Association.²⁸ From this position he furthered his attacks on the Republican-sponsored Farm Board. On October 28, 1930, he declared that "every step taken by the Federal farm board had reduced the price of wheat. . . . whenever any government agency enters into competition with private business, most of the normal support in the market deserts the commodity and today's quotations are examples of what follows." Butler further asserted that the grain dealers were not opposed to the principle of cooperation itself, only to the methods by which the "government is coercing farmers to join a particular setup."²⁹

Butler's hostility toward the Farm Board led him to condemn in advance a meeting of the nation's leading agriculturalists arranged by the Senate Agricultural

26. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 18, 1930.

27. Stone, "Agrarian Ideology," 358-359.

28. *Omaha's Own Magazine*, V (November, 1930), 16.

29. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 29, 1930.



*Senator Butler awarding the Fay Johnson Butler
Scholarship to its 1946 recipient*—COURTESY DOANE COLLEGE

Committee. In addition to Secretary of Agriculture Arthur M. Hyde and Chairman of the Federal Farm Board Alexander Legge, the Committee had extended invitations to the chief executives of the Grange, the Farm Bureau, and the Farmers' Union. The conference was scheduled for November 24, 1930. Four days in advance of the session Butler vocally attacked the proposed meeting and its participants:

If the weighty and high sounding title of these gentlemen were indicative of their wisdom and their influence, the country might perhaps be pardoned for thinking some beneficial results might possibly follow their deliberation, but a second thought leads to doubt whether anything can result but a continuation of their past failures. There is no use reciting the records of Messrs. Hyde and Legge in their attempts to thwart the laws of nature by making stump speeches and spending tax money as though it was as free as water.

.....

If Mr. McNary wants to gain some information concerning the actual opinions of the men who are the basic foundation of the

government—the practical farmers of the midwest, the ‘bread basket of the nation’—let him forget the ‘painted laths’ that masquerade in official titles, and let his committee journey to where the farmers live by the million. Let the committee mingle with these farmers and their friends, the bankers and other businessmen who are their neighbors, and who know something of the actual conditions under which the west is struggling. The information thus secured at first-hand will probably give the committee a better perspective than a conference with political leaders having a supposed influence.³⁰

Butler’s reference to the agrarian myth in his attack on the agricultural conference provides an insight into his later positions on agricultural legislation while a member of the Senate. Butler never surrendered his belief in the primacy of agriculture. Nor did he ever overcome his innate hostility toward the “painted laths that masquerade in official titles.” His distrust of cabinet members and others in positions of authority remained a consistent part of his personal and political outlook.

Speaking before the Indiana Grain Dealers’ Association meeting in Indianapolis on January 21, 1931, Butler continued his attack on the Farm Board. He branded as “preposterous” advice of the Farm Board that farming be done through combination and organization of large corporations, which he said would mean doing away with most of the six million individual farms. “Ours is a basic industry and this government competition is nearing socialism. . . . The advent of the government is a serious threat to our individual liberties, rights and integrity.”³¹

On March 14, Butler attacked the board again, charging: “We can expect no return of prosperity as long as the government remains in business in competition with its own citizens. . . .”³² Keeping the federal government out of business was also one of Butler’s later political tenets.

By the spring of 1931, Senator George W. Norris, who had reluctantly supported the Agricultural Marketing Act, had also become openly critical of the operations of the Farm

30. *Ibid.*, November 21, 1930.

31. *Ibid.*, January 23, 1931.

32. *Ibid.*, March 15, 1931.

Board. Believing that the wheat which the Farm Board had accumulated through purchases by the Grain Stabilization Corporation was to be sold on the open market, Norris, by the end of 1931, was demanding an investigation of the Farm Board.³³

Butler responded favorably to Norris' proposal. In one of the few extant letters written by Butler to a Nebraska political figure prior to his own election in 1940, Butler applauded Norris' call for an investigation, stating that he was "greatly interested in the investigation of the Farm Board that you have proposed." Norris replied that he had made a specific proposal for such an investigation.³⁴

Butler's attacks on the Farm Board were in harmony with the basic anti-paternalistic philosophy of governmental responsibility which he reiterated incessantly during his senatorial career. He referred to the Agricultural Marketing Act as "paternalistic legislation," and decried the modern generation's dependency upon paternalism in government by comparing the poverty of the 1930's to that of his own early life on the frontier: "In those times people depended more on their own efforts than they do today. Too many seem to think today that the world (or at least the GOVERNMENT) owes them a living. . . ."³⁵

In his final address as president of the Grain and Feed Dealers' National Association, Butler took a parting swing at the Farm Board. At the Association's annual meeting on September 19, 1932, Butler charged that "national economic ills are only aggravated when treated by quack legislation. . . . equalization, debenture, domestic allotment are all tarred with the same stick and carry the same dangers of bureaucratic control." He concluded by suggesting that the real friends of the farmers were the members of the grain trade. "The farmer has not and cannot have any group more

33. Richard Lowitt, "George W. Norris and Agricultural Relief During the Twenties," *Nebraska History*, XXXVI, No. 3 (September, 1955), 181.

34. Hugh Butler to George W. Norris, February 20, 1932; George W. Norris to Hugh Butler, February 24, 1932, Norris MSS, LC.

35. Hugh Butler to George W. Norris, February 20, 1932, Norris MSS, LC.

eagerly desirous of his prosperity than those of us whose sole source of revenue depends upon that prosperity.”³⁶

Butler's sympathy for the farmer can be readily understood—he, too, was a farmer. He often expressed his belief that the good life was that on the family farm. Even when caught up in the turbulence of the United States Senate, Butler preferred to spend his vacation periods on his farm near Cambridge. And although he campaigned in eastern Nebraska as a grain dealer, in the western part of the state he always emphasized that he was a farmer at heart.

Butler's farming interests led to a striking inconsistency in his attitude during the days of the New Deal. As a successful Omaha businessman, he rejected most of the New Deal's program as paternalism in government, but as a farmer he participated in the programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. He later maintained that he was not completely satisfied with the A.A.A., but urged its improvement rather than repeal.³⁷

Butler's experiences as president of the Omaha Grain Exchange and of the Grain and Feed Dealers' National Association served to whet his appetite for further involvement in the affairs of the state and nation, and he continued to plan the steps which would lead him to this goal. Butler served on the Omaha Board of Education from 1929 until 1932. Running for this position was an excellent way to attract attention while avoiding most controversial issues.

Already convinced of the sorry state of affairs in the United States, Butler secured a speaker for the Omaha Rotary Club who succeeded in convincing him even more of the need for a man of his stature to enter politics. John B. Maling of Chicago addressed the Rotary Club on August 26, 1931, on the topic “The Origin and Effect of Freak, Class and Special Legislation,” in which he made an emotional plea that businessmen take heed of the signs of the times which pointed to the rapid growth of socialism and communism in

36. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 20, 1932.

37. *Ibid.*, September 22, 1940.

the United States. Charging that socialism and "stark, red Communism" had penetrated into every industry in South Chicago, Maling stated: "I have no doubt but that there is a communistic nucleus in every large plant in your City of Omaha." He also attacked as "freak, class and special legislation" bills being proposed by Norris, LaFollette, Wheeler, and others. Maling concluded his remarks with the following warning: "If you businessmen are going to keep your noses to the grindstone and your own problems so closely that you will not give any attention to these things, then I say to you, you will never hand down to your children as good a government as your fathers gave to you."³⁸

Butler felt that Maling's advice was timely. He became actively involved in Nebraska Republican politics shortly after the 1932 election. First serving as a precinct committeeman, Butler became the Republican Party chairman in Douglas County in 1934. In response to a query by Thomas O'Connor, a Democrat and Douglas County's register of deeds, as to why a successful businessman like himself would want to get into politics, Butler is said to have replied: "To get some of the politicians like you out."³⁹

Butler soon discovered the difficulties involved in attempting to remove incumbent Democrats from office. Even though he was aware that he had gained the chairmanship largely because others had not wanted it, he still entered the campaign willingly, for "under his planned career, 1934 found him ready to edge into public life."⁴⁰

Butler considered running for the United States Senate in 1934. An editorial in J. Hyde Sweet's *Nebraska City News-Press* on January 21, 1934, suggested that Hugh Butler was the type of man that Republicans should be looking for as a senatorial candidate. Sweet stated that Butler's record was "such as to warrant confidence in him and in what he believes—the old fashioned notions of decency and ability in public life."⁴¹ Butler wrote to Robert Van Pelt three days

38. *Omaha's Own Magazine*, VI (September–October, 1931), 10.

39. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 22, 1940.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Nebraska City Daily News-Press*, January 21, 1934.

later, telling him of his interest in the senatorial proposition and admitted that it would be "a tough job to break the gates of the party organization when I have no past record of party organization service." He asked Van Pelt for advice and stated that he was "assuming a listening attitude and shall continue in that mood till something definite seems advisable."⁴² Subsequently he decided that 1934 was not the proper time to make his move.

One of Butler's major achievements while chairman of the Douglas County Republican Central Committee was his work as chairman of a committee organized to develop a Republican Founder's Day program. In 1934 several Nebraska Republican officials journeyed to Kansas to observe a Republican celebration in that state. Upon their return, it was decided that Nebraska Republicans should also celebrate the observance of Nebraska's statehood. An organizational committee was appointed, with Butler named as chairman. The committee's work resulted in the establishment of a Founder's Day organization which was to be responsible for the annual meetings of the group.

Butler's successes in Douglas County led him to make another move in his journey to the Senate. In 1936 Charles A. McCloud of York announced his retirement from the position of Republican National Committeeman for Nebraska. Several Republican leaders urged Butler to seek election to that position. Butler quickly expressed his interest, but attached a rather stringent condition—that he was to run unopposed. Butler never approached a contest without almost absolute certainty of being victorious, and in 1936 he simply was not ready to jeopardize his future political aspirations in a contested and possibly unsuccessful

42. Hugh Butler to Robert Van Pelt, January 24, 1934, Robert Van Pelt MSS, seen through the courtesy of Judge Robert Van Pelt of Lincoln. Hereafter cited as Van Pelt MSS. Van Pelt recalled having advised Butler not to seek the senatorial nomination in 1934. He stated that there was mutual agreement that Robert Simmons could not be beaten in the primary and even if he could, the odds against a Republican victory in the fall were high. Butler was encouraged to begin at the bottom and work up the political ladder, which he then proceeded to do. Robert Van Pelt, personal interview with the author, Lincoln, Nebraska, March 4, 1966.

struggle for the position on the national committee. Other Republicans aspired to the position, but Butler prevailed. By the time he had completed his filing for the 1936 primary election, all other potential candidates had withdrawn.⁴³

As a candidate, Butler made several public pronouncements on the political situation. One of his more optimistic statements was made before the Abraham Lincoln Republican Club of Omaha, where he asserted that "the republicans will be victorious in state and nation next fall." His reasons for this assumption were clear: "we have no family quarrels or internal dissensions to interfere with our chances of success."⁴⁴

Running unopposed, Butler was elected national committeeman in the primary election held April 14, 1936. He set out at once to strengthen the party's position in the fall elections, a task even more difficult than that which he had assumed as chairman of the Douglas County Republicans. The Nebraska Republican Party, badly split between the progressive element and the more conservative faction, had not fared well in the 1932 and 1934 elections. Internal dissension plagued the party as the 1936 elections approached. Arthur Weaver, George Norris, Adam McMullen, and other progressive Republicans were openly supporting the reelection bid of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Within the state party organization itself, numerous divisive elements were present. State party chairman Lyle C. Jackson and the party's senatorial nominee, Robert G. Simmons, were said to be completely "out of harmony." Arthur C. Gardner, publisher of the *Elgin Review*, told Congressman Karl Stefan: "This condition makes it difficult for Mr. Butler now, and, if continued, would seriously handicap anyone closely identified with the state campaign."⁴⁵

Butler later reminisced about the difficult problems which faced him in the elections of 1936. In a letter to Don L.

43. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 22, 1940.

44. *Omaha World-Herald*, undated news clipping, Cochran MSS.

45. Arthur C. Gardner to Karl Stefan, May 1, 1936, Karl Stefan MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereafter cited as Stefan MSS.

Berry, publisher of the *Indianola (Iowa) Tribune*, Butler thanked Berry for his personal contribution to the Nebraska Republican Party in 1936. Discussing Berry's role in a Republican strategy meeting in Omaha, Butler stated: "You can hardly realize how much you help to *revive* us! We were down and out! I was almost alone in the job of bringing the corpse back to life."⁴⁶

In spite of Butler's efforts, Republican candidates fared poorly in Nebraska in the elections of 1936. Roosevelt carried the state by about one hundred thousand votes, and Norris defeated both of his opponents, Republican Robert Simmons and Democrat Terry Carpenter.⁴⁷ Butler emerged from this contest as a dedicated, hard-working, but still undefeated political prospect.

Immediately following the 1936 election, Butler indicated clearly that he intended to continue his role as a leader of the Nebraska Republican Party. Although it had been suggested to him that he seek the senatorial nomination of his party in 1936, he had wisely avoided involvement in a Norris campaign. Instead, he began making his plans for 1940 shortly after the results from 1936 were in.

Before declaring himself in the 1940 senatorial race, Butler attempted to pre-empt the only candidate he felt could keep him from gaining the nomination, Congressman Karl Stefan. According to Tom Ingoldsby, a United Press correspondent, Butler called and asked him to urge Stefan to declare himself in the race for the Senate in 1940. "I think Karl is our strongest candidate for the senate against Burke [Democrat, Edward R.]. I'd like to see Karl make the jump. If he will agree to run I will agree to do all that I can to keep others out of the race." Ingoldsby passed Butler's message on to Stefan. He reported that Butler was considering making the race himself, and that Butler had told him that "if Karl refuses I think the candidate should come from Omaha. They are urging me to run in this event. You can tell Karl I'll

46. Hugh Butler to Don L. Berry, May 24, 1943, Butler MSS.

47. Alfred Lief, *Democracy's Norris: The Biography of a Lonely Crusade* (New York: Stackpole and Sons, 1939), 491. Norris received 258,700 votes, Simmons 223,276, and Carpenter 108,391.

contribute personally to his campaign so that I will not have to make the race myself."⁴⁸

Butler's statements to Ingoldsby must be viewed with a discerning eye. In the first instance, by 1939 Butler believed that Senator Burke would not be the Democratic nominee. He correctly thought that Governor Robert LeRoy Cochran would successfully challenge Burke in the primary.⁴⁹ Thus, his telling Ingoldsby that Stefan would be the best candidate to face Burke might have been legitimate—had he really believed that Burke would have furnished the opposition. Secondly, Butler's disclaimer that he hoped Stefan would file and that he would contribute substantially so as not to have to make the race himself simply does not fit into the Butler pattern.

An Omaha attorney who was an adviser to Congressman Stefan, Herbert T. White, voiced doubts about Butler's real motive in attempting to get Stefan into the Senate race. White declared in a letter to Stefan: "My own reaction is that Butler is trying to get you to declare yourself out of the senate race. I have other knowledge that convinces me that he does want to run."⁵⁰ Stefan refused to become involved, letting it be known that he preferred the seniority which he would have in the House.

Butler's belief that Governor Cochran would defeat Senator Burke in the Democratic primary, plus his belief that he could ride the rising Republican tide and beat Cochran, led him to announce on June 14, 1939, a decision which had been years in the making; he was a candidate for the Republican nomination for the United States Senate.⁵¹ At the age of sixty-one, with his financial security achieved, Hugh Butler entered the first of his three successful contests for a seat in the United States Senate. Once in office, Butler would remain firmly entrenched until his death on July 1, 1954.

48. Tom Ingoldsby to Karl Stefan, April 24, 1939, Stefan MSS.

49. Hugh Butler to Senator Robert A. Taft, May 1, 1940, Butler MSS; Robert Van Pelt, interview, July 14, 1965.

50. Herbert T. White to Karl Stefan, May 14, 1939, Stefan MSS.

51. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 15, 1939.