



The Curious Candidacy of Americus Liberator

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Article Summary: Promising to graze his horse on the White House lawn, a memorably named Nebraska cowboy waged a colorful campaign during the turbulent 1968 presidential election season.

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The Curious Candidacy of Americus Liberator

BY GENE KOPELSON

In 1968 Secretary of State Frank Marsh formally recognized the “Peace on Earth Party,” which held its first convention in Omaha.¹ Then Herbert F. Hoover, fourth cousin of the former president, stopped by Marsh’s office wanting to run for president.² Even the mother of Miss Nebraska 1962 entered the race.³

But the strangest presidential candidate to run in Nebraska or anywhere else that year was a retired Nebraska cowboy named Americus Liberator. A Pennsylvania coal miner whose parents emigrated from Italy to the United States, Liberator worked on ranches in South Dakota and Nebraska before settling in Valentine.⁴

When Liberator began his campaign in the spring of 1968, Marsh called him a “fringe” candidate and declined to use his own authority to list him on the ballot, but said that Liberator could instead seek to be listed by petition.⁵ The candidate would need one hundred Republican signatures from each of the three Nebraska congressional districts. Liberator announced in early March that he had “met that requirement in his home Third District,” and that petition-writing drives were ongoing in the others; at the time of the report, he was only “45 signatures short” in the Second District, which included Omaha.⁶

The press had a field day with the Liberator candidacy; reports usually were tongue-in-cheek. A campaign committee was announced, the “Stand Up For Americus Committee,” and the campaign’s theme song was “Americus, Americus, God Shed His Light on Thee.” Liberator’s platform consisted of his promise to “see horses grazing on the White House lawn,” by which he meant his “favorite bronc,” thirty-year-old Pard.

Liberator soon committed his first campaign gaffe. This, a reporter wryly noted, meant that the candidate “now has to be taken seriously.” Liberator issued his first “clarifying statement” after being quoted as saying, “Cowboys aren’t bowlegged. Their legs sweat after being on a horse and they just walk

that way.” He clarified this by saying that after hours in the saddle, the cowboy’s clothes “just naturally tend to conform to the curvature of the horse.”⁷

A week later Liberator acknowledged that his petition drive was “floundering a bit,” as he had obtained only “86 signatures in the First District (which includes Lincoln) and 80 in the second (which includes Omaha).” A reporter reached Liberator at his campaign headquarters (his house) and got an “exclusive interview” (Liberator answered the phone). Liberator was described as defiant, saying he was “not ready to quit” and that he “refused to be discouraged.” If the petition drive failed he would “launch a campaign as a write-in candidate.” Liberator then revealed his secret campaign weapon: he would “stump the state, playing his guitar and singing ballads.” He explained, “I used to sing all the time, but in private—out on the range. I’ll have to get off my shy horse in order to sing in public . . . but I can do it.”⁸


News of Americus Liberator’s cowboy campaign went nationwide. He was interviewed by the *Boston Globe*, and the Americus committee released copies of the interview throughout Nebraska. But Liberator was not pleased with all aspects of the article. Though the report described him as “a rugged man on horse-back” (to which he had no objection), when it also described him as a “dark-horse candidate on a dark horse,” the proverbial horse manure hit the fan. Liberator took “exception to the implication that his 30-year-old horse, Pard, is dark in color.” Liberator wanted the world to know that “while Pard’s skin color is black, his coat is smoky white.”⁹

News from Massachusetts arrived the following month. After reading about Liberator, a group of Radcliffe students held a mock Republican primary election and telegraphed the candidate with the results: “You have won mock Nebraska Republican primary in our hall. Congratulations. Please send biographical data.” It was signed, “Residents of Holmes Hall, Third Floor. Cambridge, Mass.”

Liberator “hailed the Radcliffe vote as a harbinger of things to come” and said he would write a thank-you note to his Massachusetts supporters.¹⁰

Liberator announced that ever since he had “thrown his 10-gallon hat into the Presidential ring,” he had received “considerable mail.” His policy was to answer all letters personally and he had been “up ‘til 4 in the morning catching up with correspondence.” Having been so well received in Radcliffe, Liberator then addressed students at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. But not all news was encouraging. When told of a recent poll in which he trailed Nixon, Rockefeller, and Reagan, Liberator said, “I don’t believe in polls . . . the only poll that counts takes place on Election Day.”¹¹

A few weeks before the May 14 Nebraska primary, Liberator attended a debate at the Buffalo County Republican Women’s Club in Kearney. Two Nixon supporters debated farm policy and Liberator spoke about morals. He told the women that it was up to them “to raise the morals of the nation” and that he thought “the place to do it was the home.” He then combined his own domestic economic and foreign policies when he said that “foreign entanglements have boosted taxes until women have been forced to work.”¹²

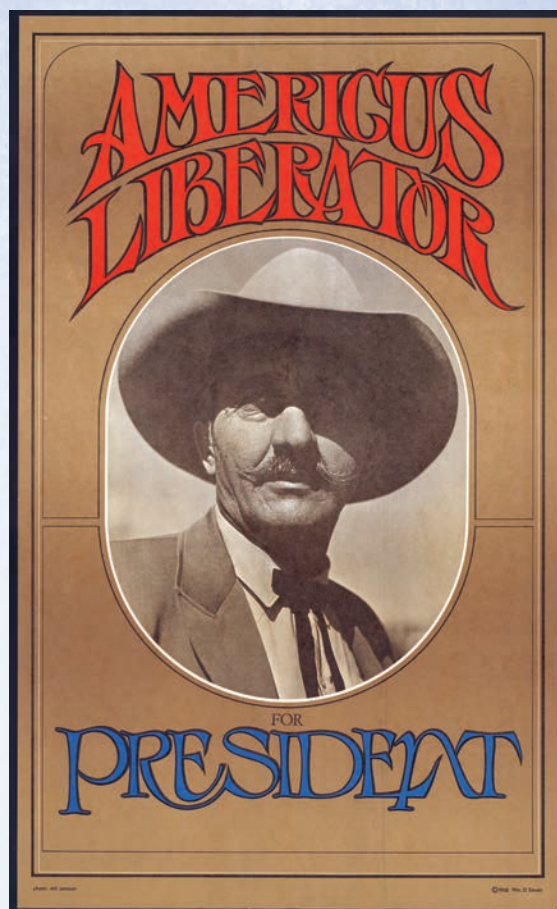
Americus Liberator was recalled fondly as a passionate orator who traveled about Nebraska in 1968 on his white horse, wearing a white suit and white hat and promising to clean up Washington.¹³ Though with 1,314 votes he did not win the Nebraska Republican primary, he announced he would be a write-in candidate in the general election and asked President Johnson for Secret Service protection.¹⁴ He ran again in 1972, 1976, and 1980, and even appeared on the 1992 Presidential ballot in Maryland.¹⁵ Liberator died in 1997 at age eighty-six and is buried in Valentine. An image of Pard is etched on his tombstone.¹⁶ He goes down in history as the only candidate to have run for the presidency three separate times against Ronald Reagan—1968, 1976, and 1980.¹⁷ 

NOTES

¹ “‘Peace On Earth’ Plans Go To Marsh,” *Omaha World-Herald* (hereafter *OWH*), Feb. 20, 1968.

² “Herbert F. Hoover Seeks to Run in Nebraska,” *OWH*, Oct. 24, 1967.

³ Larry Wilson, “Papillion Woman Beats ‘Name’ Candidate,” *OWH*, May 17, 1968.



Liberator’s 1968 campaign poster. NSHS 13002-3

⁴ “Liberator, Americus,” *Our Campaigns*, <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/candidateDetail.html?candidateID=19166> (accessed June 19, 2014)

⁵ Larry Wilson, “Rocky Won’t Be Candidate In Nebraska,” *OWH*, Jan. 17, 1968.

⁶ “What He Meant to Say,” *OWH*, Mar. 7, 1968.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1968.

⁸ Robert McMorris, “Stand-Up-For-Americus Committee in Trouble,” *OWH*, Mar. 14, 1968.

⁹ “Pale Horse, Rugged Rider,” *OWH*, Mar. 14, 1968.

¹⁰ Robert McMorris, “Radcliffe Girls Like Americus,” *OWH*, Apr. 16, 1968.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, “As Radcliffe Goes.”

¹² “Americus Says Nation’s Morals in Women’s Hands,” *OWH*, Apr. 26, 1968.

¹³ Ted Sanders, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2014.

¹⁴ “Protection Sought,” *The Daily Messenger* (Canandaigua, N. Y.), June 14, 1968, 1.

¹⁵ “1992 Presidential Election,” Maryland State Board of Elections, http://www.elections.state.md.us/elections/1992/results_1992/pegapre.html (accessed June 18, 2014)

¹⁶ “Americus ‘Mike’ Liberator (1910-1997),” *Find a Grave*, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/GRid=40496728> (accessed June 19, 2014)

¹⁷ There is no record that Liberator ran in 1984 against Reagan’s re-election.